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"LOOK DOWN THERE!" HE REPLIED. "SHE IS MY BETROTHED WIFE!"

SYBIL CHASE;

Or, THE GAMBLER'S WIFE.

BY MRS. ANN S. STEPHENS.

CHAPTER I. THE BRIDLE-PATH.

A SMALL valley cutting through a range of mountains in California—a green oasis that

looked strange and picturesque in the midst of that savage scenery. The cliffs rose in a solid wall on one side to the height of many hundred feet. Dwarfed fir-trees and dead cedars were scattered along the summit, stretching up their gaunt limbs and adding to the grandeur of the scene. Great masses of broken rocks, which, in some conflict of the elements, had been wrenched from their bed, projected from the rifted precipices and lay in great moss-covered bowlders in the lap of the valley. On the southeastern side

a break in the heart of the cliffs was covered with thrifty verdure, and, over the rocks that obstructed it, a mountain torrent rushed thundering into the valley, dividing that cradle of verdure in the middle, and abruptly disappearing through another gorge, breaking to the open country somewhat lower down, where it plunged over a second precipice with the sound of distant artillery.

Just above the spot where this mountain stream cut the valley in twain, a collection of huts, tents, and rickety frame houses composed one of those new villages that are so often found in a frontier country, and half a mile above stood a small ranch, with its long, low-roofed dwelling half buried in heavy vines that clambered up the rude cedar pillars of the veranda, and crept in leafy masses along the roof. Beyond this, great oaks sheltered the dwelling, and the precipice that loomed behind it was broken with rifts of verdure, which saved this portion of the valley from the savage aspect of the mountains lower down.

The sunset was streaming over this picturesque spot; great masses of gorgeous clouds, piled up in the west, were casting their glory down the valley, turning the waters to gold, and, flashing against the metallic sides of the mountains, changed them into rifts and ledges of solid gems.

Standing upon the rustic veranda, and looking down over the beautiful valley dotted with tents and picturesque cabins, the waters singing pleasantly, the evening wind fluttering the greenness of the trees, that mountain pass appeared so tranquil and quiet, a stranger could hardly have believed the repose only an occasional thing. In truth, it is the heavenly aspect of the valley that I have given you, and that was truly beautiful.

Only a few miles off, still higher up among the rugged mountains, the "gold diggings" commenced, and from this point, every Saturday night of that beautiful summer, came down crowds of wild, reckless men with their bowie-knives, revolvers, and the gold-dust which soon changed hands either at the liquor-bar, set up in some log-cabin, or the gambling-table, established in an opposite shanty.

Before the gold excitement, that pretty ranch had been the abode of a quiet family, whose cattle were fed on the luxuriant herbage of the valley; but the reckless adventurers that crowded there soon drove the household into less turbulent quarters, and the dwelling changed its occupants many times. Thus its quiet walls soon became accustomed to scenes of strife and dissipation, which destroyed its respectable, home-like appearance entirely; and the place that had originally been a pleasing feature in the valley shared the general aspect of the neighborhood. Still, nature will assert her rights; and, amid the wild riot of the valley, vines grew luxuriantly as ever, flowers blossomed in the turf, and the waterfall sounded loud and clear above the shouts of savage men, however turbulently they might be raised.

By one of the upper windows of this dwelling stood a woman, leaning idly against the rude sill and looking down the sweep of the valley.

Hers was no attitude of expectation; there was no eagerness in the great eyes that wandered slowly from one object to another, nor did the glance betray any enjoyment of the beautiful scene. The woman was evidently lost in deep and melancholy thought; each moment the lines about her mouth deepened, and the cold sadness of the eyes settled into a hard, bitter expression, which gave something almost repulsive to the whole face.

She looked very unlike the sort of woman one would have expected to find in that solitary place. She was tall and slender, and her form would have appeared almost fragile had it not been for a certain flexibility and force visible in every line even in that attitude of repose.

She was young still; but from her face it would have been impossible to guess at her real age. At one moment it looked fairly girlish; the next the shadow of some heavy thought swept across it and

appeared to accomplish the work of years upon the features.

It was evident that her fate had been very different from that which met most of the women who followed husbands and fortunes into the Eldorado of the New World. The hand which lay upon the window-frame was delicate and white; the colorless pallor of the cheek bore no evidence of hardship or exposure.

She was plainly dressed, but her garments were made in a picturesque fashion, and the few ornaments she wore were heavy and rich. Her long, golden hair was brushed smoothly back from her forehead and gathered in shining bands at the back of her head, and made the chief beauty of her person. Only those who have seen the tress of Lucretia Borgia's hair, preserved still in a foreign gallery, can form any idea of the peculiar color which I desire to describe. I was wrong to call it golden; it was too pale for that. In the shadow it had the colorless tint one seldom sees, except in the locks of very young children; but when she moved so that the sun struck its loose ripples, it flashed out so brightly that it crowned her forehead like a halo.

The sunset deepened, but still the lady remained leaning out of the window and giving herself up to that gloomy meditation, which sometimes seemed to deepen into absolute pain.

Suddenly a new object at the upper end of the valley attracted her attention, and she gazed with more eagerness than she had before manifested.

Leading by the place where the mountain torrent had cleft its way through the rocks, there ran a bridge-path, worn by the miners' feet, from the gold diggings down the valley. It was toward that spot the lady's eyes were directed, as a small cavalcade wound slowly down the rocky path and took the grassy plain which led toward the ranch.

An expression of displeasure disturbed the stillness of the woman's face. She shaded her eyes with her hand and looked eagerly toward the advancing group; but at that distance it was impossible to distinguish more than that it consisted of three men mounted on mules, followed by several persons on foot.

She moved quickly from the window and passed into another room; in a moment she returned, carrying a spy-glass which she directed toward the procession. After the first glance she drew a heavy breath and muttered:

"It is not they! I shall have an hour more to myself, at all events."

She still continued to watch the slowly approaching group, and saw that one of the equestrians was supported in his saddle by two of the guides, while another led the mule by the bridle. The rider had evidently met with some accident on the road.

Slowly the party moved on: they were in recognizable distance from the house; by the aid of her glass, the lady could distinguish the lineaments of each face.

Suddenly she grasped the glass hard in both hands and looked steadily at the injured man. A great change passed over her; she trembled violently and her face grew ashen. Her fingers shook so that she was obliged to support the glass against the window-sill. At length her hands fell to her side, and a cry broke from her lips like the angry moan of some wounded animal.

"Oh! I must be mad!" she exclaimed. "This can not be—I fancied it! This is one of my wild dreams!"

With a powerful effort she controlled herself sufficiently to raise the glass once more. Nearer and nearer the group advanced; her eyes were fastened upon it with a look of unutterable fear and agony.

"Laurence!" she exclaimed again; "Laurence in this place! Oh! I shall go mad! They are coming to the house—they mean to spend the night here!" The words broke unconsciously from her lips; all the while her strained gaze was fastened upon the group. "He has been hurt—he has fainted!"

"She dropped the glass and started to her full height, striking her forehead violently with her clenched hand, as if searching for some plan or device, which, in her agitation and terror, she could not find.

"Fool!" she muttered, bitterly. "Is this your strength? Does it desert you now?"

She walked hurriedly up and down the room, flinging her arms about, so overcome that anything like connected thought was impossible.

"He must not see me—I would rather be hurled over the precipice! He must not stay here. Oh! mercy—mercy! if Philip should come home!"

She cast one more feverish glance through the window and hurried out of the room, nerved to action by the near approach of pain and danger. But directly she came back again, looking wild and frightened, like a bird coming back to the branch where it has been wounded. She took up the glass again, steadied it firmly. She was evidently doubtful still if she had seen aright.

CHAPTER II.

A FACE FROM THE PAST.

THE party of strangers were slowly winding their way across the plain, and had arrived within a short distance of the house. The woman gazed on them through her glass till the man supported on his mule became quite visible to the naked eye; then she dropped her hand heavily, and drew a deep breath.

"How white he is! There has been violence. He has fainted. See how his head falls on the guide's shoulder," she murmured, sweeping a hand across her eyes as if some dimness had come over them.

The lady was quite alone in her dwelling. The Indian women who acted as the household servants had gone to the hills in search of berries, and thus she was compelled to descend and open the door, when a summons was made by the party whose approach had given her so much anxiety. At another time, knowing, as she did, the lawless nature of the population around, she would have allowed the besiegers to knock unanswered, and go away at their leisure; but now she descended the stairs, trembling violently as she went. She had thrown a black silk scarf over her head, thus giving her dress a Spanish effect, and, unclosing the door, stood framed in the opening—and a more remarkable picture was never presented in the wilderness of any country. It was not that the woman was so beautiful, in fact, but the color of her hair and the wild anxiety in her eyes gave that to her person which no artist could ever have caught. The guide, who had come in advance of his party, stepped back in amazement as she presented herself, for it was seldom that the people of the region had obtained a glimpse of her person, and her presence took him by surprise.

The party were now within a few minutes' ride of the ranch, and a weary, travel-soiled band it was. The mules were stained far above their flocks with yellow mud, through which they had floundered all day long; and the travelers, in their slouched hats, blue flannel shirts, and heavy boots, ingulfing the nether garments to the knees, were liberally bespattered with the same compound. The mules were huddled close together, for one of the riders was supporting the wounded man on his saddle; the other had dismounted when the guide left him, and was leading the sick man's mule, while his own tired beast followed submissively in the wake of the party.

Before the guide had recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to address the lady, who seemed perfectly unconscious of his presence, the party halted in front of the veranda.

The two gentlemen sprung forward to assist their companion, who lay helpless in his saddle, his head falling upon the shoulder of the man that supported him. With the assistance of the guides he was removed from the mule and carried up the steps of the veranda. They laid him upon a bench under the windows, then the two companions of the insensible man turned toward the lady.

She had not stirred. Her eyes were fastened upon the motionless figure over which the guides were bending with rough solicitude; the strained, eager look in her face seemed to demand an explanation which her lips had no power to frame.

The two gentlemen moved toward her, struck, even in that moment of anxiety, by her appearance, and saluted her with the courtesy which proved their station and high-breeding.

"We owe you a thousand apologies, madam," said the foremost, "for this abrupt proceeding; but our friend here had a hurt."

She started at his words, instinctively drew the folds of the mantle more closely about her face, and said, quickly:

"No apology is necessary; in this region strangers consider themselves at home in every house."

"I thought you'd say so, ma'am," said one of the guides, approaching and looking curiously at her. "I s'pose Mr. Yates ain't to hum."

"No; I believe he is at the mines," she answered; then added quickly, pointing to the injured man:

"Has he fainted?"

"You see he got a fall," answered the guide, before either of the gentlemen could speak, "a coming over that rough pass on the mountain; but I think he's only stunted like."

"I am afraid his arm is broken," said the elder gentleman.

The lady hurried toward the injured man; her face was turned away, so that none of the party could see how ghastly it became. She bent over the still form, dextrously cut open the sleeve of his coat with a pair of scissors which she drew from her pocket, and took the injured limb between her trembling hands.

"It is only a sprain," she said; "the agony and the shock have been too much for him."

"He bore it very well at first," said the gentleman who had followed her; "but fainted quite suddenly, just as we got down into the valley."

The lady made him no answer; she directed the guides where to find water and spirits. Going into the house herself, she brought out a large napkin, which she saturated with water, and bound upon the wounded arm.

While she was bending over him, the man gave signs of returning consciousness. She started back, and shrouded her face completely in the mantle.

"Laurence," called out one of his friends, stooping over him, "are you better?"

There was a faint murmur; the injured man raised his head, but it sunk back, and he was insensible again.

"Is there no physician near?" demanded the gentleman. "I am very anxious. He is not strong, like the rest of us."

"You will find one at Wilson's ranch," replied the lady.

"How far is that?"

"Good seven miles," answered the guide.

"It will take so long to get him here," exclaimed the first speaker.

"Your best way will be to go there," observed the lady, coldly.

The whole party turned toward her in astonishment; hospitality is the chief virtue of wild countries, and it was an unparalleled thing in the experience of those old guides, to hear a woman so coolly turning a stranger, sick or injured, from her door.

"My dear madam," pleaded the gentleman, "he can not ride; it will be dangerous—death, perhaps."

"He will come to himself, shortly," she answered. "I assure you I have proposed the best mode. I do not mean it unkindly. Heaven knows how sorry I am."

The eldest guide absolutely whistled, and the men stared at each other, while she busied herself over Laurence, although her whole frame shook so violently that she could scarcely stand.

"Can't you give us a bed for our friend?" asked the gentleman. "The rest of us will sleep anywhere or go away altogether."

"No—no," she replied, hastily; "you must ride on, I say."

"Wal, I'm shot if ever I heerd the beat of that!" muttered a guide.

"The road from here is very good," she continued; "your friend will suffer little; these men can easily make a litter and carry him."

"He's coming to," whispered the other gentleman.

The woman stepped quickly back, and when she saw the injured man open his eyes, retreated into the room.

"How are you now, Laurence?" asked his friends, bending over him.

"Better, I think; I am dizzy, but my arm isn't so very painful. Did I faint?"

While they answered his questions, the guides held a grumbling consultation, and finally summoned the elder gentleman to the conference.

"What'll we do?" they asked. "It'll be pitch dark afore long, and that feller can't set his horse."

"I will speak to the lady again," he answered. "I am sure she cannot turn us out."

"It's a queer house," said the head guide, "and that's the fact. There ain't a place in Californy I wouldn't rather stop at."

"I s'pose that's Yates's wife," said the man who had first reached the house. "As often as I've passed here, I never see'd her afore."

"Tisn't often she shows herself," replied the leader. "But will you go and speak to her?" he added, turning to the gentleman.

"Certainly; of course she will permit us to stay."

He went into the house, but the lady was not visible. He opened the door of an inner room, and there she stood, wringing her hands in wild distress. She turned at the sound of his footstep, and demanded, angrily:

"What do you wish more? I have done all that I can for your friend."

"I have come to urge you to give us one night's lodging," he said; "it seems impossible for us to go on—"

"You must," she said, interrupting him passionately; "you must!"

"This is very singular," he said, so startled by her manner that he was almost inclined to believe her insane. "In the name of humanity, I ask—"

She stopped him with an impatient gesture, went close to him, and grasped his arm.

"I tell you," she whispered, "this place is not safe for you; get on toward Wilson's as fast as your mules can carry you."

"Surely you cannot mean—"

"No matter what! Sir, I ask you, for my sake, a poor defenseless woman, to go! I have done all for our friend that is in my power; you only endanger his life—mine too, by staying here."

He bowed, stupefied by her words.

"Certainly," he said; "after that I can not urge you."

"I knew you would not; only go—don't wait an instant!"

She spoke with feverish haste, and her whole appearance was that of a person driven to the verge of distraction by fear and anxiety.

"I can give you food," she added, "or spirits—"

"Thank you; we have every thing with us that will be necessary."

"Then go! Your road leads by the river—keep that napkin about his arm wet with water, and he will do very well."

She motioned him away with wild energy. He saw the insane dread in her eyes, left the room without a word, and joined the party on the veranda.

"Do we stay?" demanded the guides.

The gentleman shook his head, and, without waiting to hear their angry expostulations, moved toward his friend.

Laurence was sitting up, and, although still very pale, looked stronger and greatly recovered.

"Could you ride a few miles further, Ned?" he asked.

"Possibly; but can't we stay here?"

"No—no; there's a deuced mystery about the whole matter! But we must start, or I believe that woman will go crazy; don't let's wait a moment, if you can manage to get onto your mule."

The lady's strange anxiety had infected him; he felt an unaccountable eagerness to leave that quiet old house far behind, and would rather have spent the whole night in the woods than again encounter the frenzied pleading of her eyes.

In a few moments, their preparations were concluded. Laurence was seated upon his mule in the most commodious manner that could be devised, and the party rode slowly off down the valley, the guides looking back with muttered execrations as long as the old house was in sight.

From an upper window the woman watched them start, shivering and white, with her hands pressed hard against her lips to keep back the moans that shuddered from her heart.

As the cavalcade reached a turn in the road, and began to disappear from her sight, she extended her arms with a low cry:

"Laurence! Laurence!"

The words were pronounced in a whisper, but to her affrighted senses they sounded strangely clear. She covered into a seat, and covered her face with her hands. No tears fell from her eyes; she could not even weep—could only sit there, trembling at every sound, looking eagerly out to be certain that the travelers had indeed disappeared, then glancing up the valley, as if expecting each moment to see some one approach by the path which led from the mountains.

CHAPTER III.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

NIGHT had come on; the full moon was up, filling the valley with a flood of radiance and lending a mysterious beauty to the scene. As the silver beams shot against the mountain sides, the streaks of quartz and glittering minerals emitted long rays of light that shone so brilliantly the cliffs seemed encircled with flame. Above rose the jagged trunks of the fir-trees, looking like weird shapes holding counsel upon the summit of the peaks.

At length sounds from without broke the stillness—the tramp of horses, the loud, reckless conversation of coarse men. The watcher in that room only cowered lower into her seat, as if those tones had deprived her of the last gleam of strength which had been her support during the previous hours.

There were voices from the room beneath—drinking songs chanted with such energy that the words were distinctly audible where she sat—the ring of glasses, rude toasts and the tumult in which heedless, hardened men are wont to indulge in the midst of a bacchanalian revel.

Very soon there was a step upon the stairs, which made the woman spring to her feet and throw aside the mantle in which she had been shrouding her face. The door was pushed open and a man entered carrying a candle, which flared uncertainly in the draught from the passage. He did not at first perceive her, and called angrily:

"Sybil! Sybil! where the deuce are you, I say?"

"I am here," she replied, with a coldness and composure of which she had appeared incapable a moment before. "What do you want of me?"

"What is a man likely to want when he comes home tired and hungry, I should like to know?"

"The women are getting supper; it will be ready very soon."

"And what are you doing up here in the dark?"

"This is the room where I usually sit, and it certainly is not dark," she replied, quietly as before, although her hands trembled nervously, and the expression of her eyes betrayed something akin to absolute fear.

"Sitting in the moonlight like a school-girl!" he sneered. "I should think you might have got over your romance by this time."

She did not answer; he approached, and held the light close to her face, with a sneering laugh.

"Who has been here to-day?" he asked. "Now, don't tell that he you have ready on your lips. I know there was a party of men here about sunset."

"Some people who wished to stay all night," she replied.

"Why didn't you keep them?"

"I did not suppose you would like it, as I knew you would be back with a party from the mines."

"How innocent she is!" he exclaimed, laughing again. "By the powers, Sybil, I have made a mistake! I ought to have put you on the stage. That sort of talent would have made a fortune for us both."

"It is not too late," she said, with a certain eagerness.

"Oh, isn't it? Well, we can talk about that some other time. Just now I want to know what brought that Laurence here?"

She tried to look at him with astonishment, but, actress as she was, her craft failed for once; the lids drooped over her eyes, and her lips refused to utter the words she struggled to force upon them.

"Now stop that," said he. "Just tell the truth, or I'll follow him, and he shall have a taste of my bowie-knife before morning. What did he want? Make a short story of it, for I am hungry."

"He had been traveling among the mountains with some friends, and got hurt. They wanted to stay here, but I would not keep them, and they went away."

"So far so good! You was afraid I should kill them, eh?"

"Yes," she answered; "but more afraid that he would recognize me."

"Then you didn't speak to him?"

"No; he had fainted. I was not likely to make myself known to any of my former friends," she added, bitterly.

"As Phil Yates the gambler's wife? No, I suppose not. Well, he is gone, so let the matter rest. Come, you're a rather good girl. I want you to dress yourself and come down to supper—look your prettiest."

"Who is there?"

"Oh, mostly our set of fellows."

"Then I shall not go down."

"Indeed! I haven't time to make a scene. There are a couple of young chaps fresh from the mines with lots of gold-dust. Now will you come?"

"Will you promise to conduct yourselves like men?"

"Upon my word, she is making terms! Yes, I will. I tell you, Sybil, the gold we win from them to-night will help to shorten your stay here. Think of that, and come."

"I don't wish any supper. I will come down afterward."

"So be it. Put on the pink dress with all those flounces, that I brought you from San Francisco, and look young, and do try and be handsome again."

"Shall we be able to go from here soon, Philip?" she asked.

"Not a day before I please," he replied, irritated by the question. "Show any anxiety, and you shall spend your life here. I promise you it shall not be a pleasant one."

"Have I complained?" she demanded, sinking her voice to a tone of singular sweetness. "Have I not clung to you as few women would have done? Can you blame me for longing to have another home than this?"

"It is natural enough; but patience, Sybil, patience."

"I have had patience," she muttered, while a dangerous light shot into her eyes. "so long—so long!"

"You are a great woman, Sybil, I always admit that; but you know very well that if you left me I should have hunted you like a wolf—aha! my bird!"

The gleam in her eyes died into a look of cold terror; she extended her hand for the light, saying:

"Go down to your guests. I will follow very soon."

He gave her the candle, laughing again in that mocking way.

"Poor Sybil!" he said. "It is hard to have old memories stirred up as they have come upon you this evening."

"Stop!" she said, with a quiet resolution. "You shall not worry my life out, Philip Yates! You know there is a point beyond which I will not bear a word or look. Reach it, and though you murdered me, I would desert you!"

He gave her a glance of careless admiration, but did not annoy her further.

Yates was a remarkable-looking man as he stood there in his rough mountain dress, which was sufficiently picturesque in effect to atone for the coarseness of its materials and make.

He could not have been over thirty-five—very possibly not so much; but a life of reckless dissipation had long ago worn the youth out from his face. He had once been handsome—was so still, in spite of his heavy, undressed beard and the desperate expression of his features. He was tall and remarkably well formed, with sinewy limbs and a full, broad chest. The exposure and action which he had experienced in that wild California existence had increased his manly beauty in strength and proportion, to make amends for sweeping the delicacy and refinement from his face. The eyes were gray, not prominent, usually half veiled by the lids, with a cold, quiet expression which could warm into eagerness or flame with passion, but were utterly incapable of any thing like softness or sensibility. The lower part of the face was hidden by the flowing beard of a rich chestnut brown; but the massive contour of the under jaw, the firm-set mouth, betrayed enough to have justified a physiognomist in ascribing to him the hard, reckless character which in reality belonged to him.

Without again addressing his wife, he left the room. She heard him whistling an opera air—some reminiscence of the old life—as he descended the stairs, and the notes carried her back to the pleasant existence which had been hers for a season, and from which that man had so ruthlessly dragged her.

The light which kindled in her eyes was ominous; the expression of her face, could he have seen it, might have awakened a deeper distrust in his mind than had ever before troubled him. It would have justified a fear for his personal safety. There was all that and more in the single glance which she cast into the gloom.

No murmur escaped her; she did not even sigh, as a weaker or gentler woman would have done; but, knowing her destiny, looked it full in the face and went forward to meet it without a tear!

She took up the candle and passed into her chamber, proceeding to change her dress and follow her husband's commands in the adornment of her person.

She knew very well what was required of her—a part that she had often before performed at his bidding, and one from which her moral sensibilities did not always shrink. This woman had simply to make herself pleasant and agreeable—to sit by and converse sweetly while those two strangers were cheated of their hard earned gold at a card-table. She was to bewilder them by her smiles and conversation—nothing more; and, as I have said, she did not always shrink from this role.

Sybil Yates was not a good woman, and yet there was something in her nature which, under other training and circumstances, might have dignified her into a very different person. Her phrenological developments would have puzzled the most devoted lover of that unsatisfactory science. She was capable of great endurance and self-sacrifice, not only to secure her own interests, but she was earnest in the service of any one for whom she felt affection or attachment. Her nature was essentially reticent and secretive; she had a faculty which few women possess, that of waiting patiently and for a long time, in order to attain any object which fastened itself on her desire.

But it is useless attempting any description of the woman's character. It will best develop itself in the course of this narrative, in which it was her fate to act a prominent part.

That she must have loathed the life to which she found herself condemned is certain. Sybil's heart was more depraved than her intellect or her moral character, and any thing like coarseness or open vice was essentially distasteful to her. It was this womanly refinement which had made the presence of her husband a torment. Probably hatred of this man had grown to be one of the strongest feelings in her nature; yet she was kind and forbearing—everything that even a good and affectionate wife could have been in her domestic life. True, she stood in mortal terror of him—base, physical terror, for he had become degraded beyond belief, and had more than once raised his hand against her in his drunken wrath.

Still she clung to him—put her old life resolutely aside, and looked only forward to the time when he would take her from that dreary wilderness and go out into the world where she had first keenly enjoyed the sweets of refined life.

She had fine talents, a splendid education and was well endowed for any station in which destiny could have placed her. Let me do her the justice to acknowledge that under better influences she would probably have been simply a farsighted, diplomatic woman of the world, reducing all about her to obedience by the incomprehensible fascination which made all men who approached her admirers or slaves. Satisfied with her position and influence, the under depths of her nature would have been so little excited, that in all probability she herself would have been forever unconscious of the dark traits which lay hidden in her restless heart.

But it was useless to speculate upon what she might have been. She was—alas! for her—Philip Yates's wife, far from any who could have aided her, even if she would have permitted the slightest interposition in her fate. Doomed to obey his commands, she was apparently ready enough to gratify him, and managed, even in that secluded spot, to win all the pleasure and cheerfulness out of her life which it was possible to obtain.

She dressed herself, according to her promise. When her toilet was completed, it was astonishing to see how brilliantly she came out of the cloud which had appeared to envelop her. Her face caught its most girlish expression—the large eyes grew luminous—the smile about her mouth was playful and sweet. Those tresses of billowy hair, woven in luxuriant braids back of her head, would of themselves have relieved her face from any charge of plainness.

This woman put out her candle and turned to the window. For many moments she stood looking out into the glorious night and watching every effect with the sensations an artist could have understood.

Then, in spite of herself, back into the past fled her soul, and the chill waves of memory rushed over her. She flung her white arms aloft, and cried out in her pain. Once more that man's name died on her lips in a passionate echo, which frightened even herself: "Laurence! Laurence!"

A burst of merriment from below recalled her to the present, and the hard destiny which lay before her. With the strong self-command acquired in her strange life, she banished from her features every trace of care; the soft light crept into her eyes again, the pleasant smile settled upon her lips.

She took from the table a thin blue scarf, and, flinging it gracefully over her shoulders, as we see drapery in Guido's pictures, passed down stairs toward the room where her husband and his guests were seated, already, as she could detect by the broken words which reached her ear, occupied with the fatal games which had driven so many men to ruin within those very walls.

CHAPTER IV

TWO CONFEDERATES, IN COUNCIL.

PHILIP YATES and his wife were sitting upon the veranda of their house one pleasant evening, some time after the events described in the last chapter.

He was in unusually good humor and fine spirits that night. Probably, during the past weeks, his successes had been numerous; and however much his wife might have deplored the cause had she been a woman to feel the sin and degradation, she could but have congratulated herself upon the effect which it produced.

He was smoking and talking at intervals to Sybil, who sat in a low chair at a little distance, looking down the valley with the earnest, absent gaze habitual with her.

"Sing me something, Sybil," he said, at last; "it's deuced dull sitting here alone. I can't see what keeps Tom."

"Do you expect him back to-night?" she asked, indifferently, more as if fearful of offending him by her silence than from any desire of her own for conversation.

"I did, but it is growing so late I begin to think he won't come; it's always the way if one wants a man."

"You have no business on hand?"

"Not to-night; I need him for that very reason. What's the use of a man's smoking his cigar and drinking his glass all alone."

Sybil smiled, not bitterly even, with a sort of careless scorn, which would have irritated the man had he seen it—but her face was partially turned away; he saw only the outlines of her colorless cheek, which took a singular grace and softness in the moonlight.

"Are you going to sing?" he asked, after a moment's silence, broken only by a malediction upon his cigar. "How many times must one ask you to do a thing before you condescend to pay attention?"

She made no answer, but began at once a Spanish song, in a powerful contralto voice, which rung pleasantly through the stillness, as if a score of birds in the neighboring almond thicket had been awakened by the beauty of the night, and were joining their notes in a delicious harmony.

When the song was finished she began another without waiting for him to speak, and for a full half-hour she continued her efforts to amuse him, without the slightest appearance of distaste or weariness.

Suddenly another sound came up through the night—the tread of heavy feet and voices, evidently approaching the house.

"Hush!" said Yates, quickly. "Somebody is coming."

Sybil paused, with the words unfinished upon her lips, and both listened intently.

"It must be Tom," exclaimed Philip; "nobody but he ever whistles like that."

He listened for an instant longer, then called out: "Hello, I say!"

The echo came back distinctly, then a human voice answered the salutation.

"It is Tom," said Yates. "I hope to the Lord there's somebody with him. I'm frantic to be at work."

Just then several figures became visible in a turn of the path; Yates went down the steps and walked forward to meet them, while Sybil leaned her cheek against the low railing and looked quietly down, humming fragments of the air which her husband had so unceremoniously interrupted.

Yates joined the party, and they stood for a few moments in conversation; then the whole group moved toward the house, Sybil watching them still with that careless yet singular expression which few men could look upon without emotion.

There was no one with the new-comer, except two or three of the men who were employed by Yates

and his friend about the place, more probably by way of making a security of numbers than from any actual necessity that existed for their services. These men passed toward another entrance, while Yates and his companion ascended the steps of the veranda.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Yates," the man called out.

She answered his greeting civilly enough, but without changing her attitude, and began even whispering the pretty song, as if she found something soothing in the simple words.

"You haven't had any supper, Tom?" Yates asked.

"None, and I am hungry as a wolf."

Yates went to the house door and called vigorously:

"Yuba! Yuba you old fool, get supper ready at once."

When an answering cry assured him that his summons had been heard and would receive attention, he brought from the hall a japan tray, upon which were placed several bottles and glasses.

"You may as well wet your throat, Tom, while you're waiting for supper; it's deuced warm to-night."

The man assented with a guttural laugh, the two seated themselves near the table on which Yates had placed the waiter, and filled their glasses, clashing them against each other.

"Will you have a little wine, Mrs. Yates?" asked the stranger. "I know how you like it mixed."

But she declined the offer, leaned her head still lower upon the railing, and looked away across the valley where the moonlight played, far off in the very center of the flat, lying so unbroken and silvery that it had the effect of a small lake hidden among the great trees and luxuriant vines.

As the two men sat opposite each other, tilted back in their great wicker-chairs, it was curious to notice the resemblance between them. They might have been taken for twin brothers, yet it was one of those accidental likenesses which one occasionally sees in all countries. There was no tie of blood between them, or any reason for this look of consanguinity. The chances of their reckless lives had thrown them together, a similarity of tastes and a series of mutual benefits preserved the intimacy which had sprung up among the rank weeds of human life.

Dickinson had not the claims to manly beauty which Yates had once possessed, yet his features bore the same type of countenance on a larger, coarser scale; but in form or movement they were so much alike, that when their backs were turned, it would have puzzled even a person who knew them well to have told one from the other.

While they conversed, Sybil did not appear to listen, yet not a word escaped her vigilant ear, and sometimes she turned her face partially, and flashed toward them that strange look which so entirely changed the expression of her countenance.

"But I haven't heard what kept you all this while up at the diggings," Yates was saying, as Sybil turned again toward the table. "I know you haven't been at work—you're too lazy for that, and too wise; fools work, and cute men, like you and I, catch gold easier."

Dickinson laughed, and pulled out an old wallet, rattled the coins which it contained, and held up to view a shot-bag, apparently containing a large quantity of gold dust.

"All from a quiet game under a clump of myrtle bushes," he said, with another laugh.

"But that hasn't kept you all this time."

"No; I was over to Sancher's ranch. I knew there was nothing going on here, and we are apt to get cross when it is stupid—eh, Mrs. Yates?"

"Did you speak?" she asked, as if suddenly aroused by his voice.

"I say Phil and I are not two angels for temper in dull times; do you think so?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, good-naturedly enough; "fallen angels, you know, twice degraded."

The men laughed heartily, and Dickinson gave her a glance of honest admiration; she was evidently a woman for whom he felt sincere respect—the sentiment which a dull rogue has for a clear-headed, acute person whom he is willing to acknowledge as his superior.

"Ah, it's of no use to clash tongues with you," he said. "I learned that a great while ago."

Sybil rose from her seat, and walked slowly down the veranda toward the door, paused an instant, flung back some mocking speech in answer to his words and Philip's laugh, and passed into the house.

"That's a wonderful woman!" exclaimed Dickinson, when she had disappeared through the doorway. "I tell you what, Phil, there ain't three men in California with a head-piece equal to that on her handsome shoulders."

"She's well enough," replied Yates, carelessly; "it would be odd if she hadn't learned a few things since the time she married me, and took to life."

"You be blessed!" retorted Tom. "Her head is a deuced sight longer and clearer than yours. I tell you, a keen woman like that is more than a match for any man."

"She had better not try any thing of that sort with me!" exclaimed Yates, sullenly.

"Nonsense; she doesn't want to! I never saw a woman more devoted to a fellow, or so ready to help him along in every way. I tell you, I'm not very fond of chains or ministers, but I'd get married in a legal way to-morrow if I could find a female like her to yoke myself to."

"Wait till she's my widow, Tom," Yates replied, with a laugh. "Sybil's well enough, but she'd play the deuce, like any woman, if she dared. She knows better than to put on any airs with me. If another sort of man owned her, he'd see stars!"

"Oh, you're cross as a bear to her—I'll say that for you; and you never had any more feeling, Phil Yates—"

"There, Thomas, that will do. Drink before supper never did suit your head—so just hush up!"

"Nonsense; don't let's have any of your confounded sneers. A fellow can't speak without being treated to something of that sort, and I hate it!"

He set his glass down on the table with an energy that made the bottles dance; but Yates only laughed, and Dickinson soon smoked himself into a state of reasonable tranquillity.

Thus much of their conversation Sybil paused in the hall to hear. She lifted her hand and shook it menacingly toward her husband, while the fire kindled and leaped in her blue eyes, rendering them ten times more cruel and ferocious than anger can orbs of a darker color. But, after that momentary spasm of anger, she passed on; and, as she walked slowly back and forth through the silent rooms, the coldness and quiet came back to her face.

"I've a bit of news, Phil," said Dickinson, after a few moments, "and it is worth hearing."

"Tell it then, by all means."

"This isn't just the place. Who knows how many listeners we may have!"

"Fiddlesticks! The men are busy eating, and the women looking at them. There's nobody to listen unless it be Sybil—"

"She never takes the trouble," interrupted Tom. "If we tell her a thing, well and good; if not, she never bothers her head about the matter."

"I believe that is true. But what is your news?"

Dickinson rose and walked toward the hall, to be certain that there was no intruder within hearing; then he returned to the table and drew his chair close to that of his friend.

"It's that which kept me up at the diggings," said he. "I wanted to hear all I could."

"Well?"

"There's a chap over at Scouter's Point that's come on from San Francisco to attend to some claims for Wilmurt's widow. He's sold out her right, and he's got the stuff in his pocket—a good round sum it is, too!"

"Yes," Yates said, quietly, holding his glass up to the moonlight, as if admiring the color of the liquor.

"He is coming on with his guide and servant to our diggings on some business; and there's several chaps who know him mean to take that opportunity to send away a lot of nuggets and dust."

Yates set the glass down quickly, and leaned toward his friend.

"Does he touch these?"

He made a motion as if shuffling a pack of cards; but Dickinson shook his head.

"Not a bit of use. I saw a fellow that knows him well. He's a New York lawyer that came out here on some business, and took up this affair just for the fun of the thing, and so as to have a chance to see the diggings."

"Then what's the use of talking about it," exclaimed Yates, angrily, "if he won't drink or play?"

"I don't know," said Tom, artfully. "I told you of it because I thought you would like to hear. You are always complaining that we never have any adventure, and that you might as well be promenading Broadway for all the sport there is to be found."

Yates whistled an opera air, from beginning to end, in the most elaborate manner. At the close he said:

"When will he be at the diggings?"

"Day after to-morrow, at the latest."

"This is Monday, isn't it?"

"Of course it is."

"I wasn't certain. One fairly loses the day of the week in this confounded desert. Monday be it. On Wednesday he will reach the diggings."

"Yes; he means to stay there a couple of days."

"On Saturday, then, he will pass through the valley."

"Exactly so, Philip. Your arithmetic is wonderful."

"No doubt of it. I may be professor in a college yet."

"He will have to stop here all night, for he can't leave the diggings before noon. Old Jones asked me if I thought you would keep him."

"What did you say?"

"That you didn't keep a tavern, and that your wife was mighty particular. But if he was a gentleman, I didn't suppose either you or she would send him on after dark."

"No," said Yates; "oh, no!"

"There'll be a crowd in the valley," continued Dickinson. "There's more gold been dug these last days than there has in months, and they'll be down to the tents and over here to get rid of it, you may bet your life."

"So be it," returned Yates. "They couldn't dispose of it to more worthy people."

"Then they laughed immoderately, as if the words had covered an excellent jest. Before the conversation could be resumed, a dwarfish old Indian woman, who was a miracle of ugliness, appeared at the door and announced that their supper was waiting."

"Come in, Tom," said Yates, rising with the utmost alacrity. "I couldn't eat any dinner for lack of company. You know Sybil picks like a sparrow—and I shall be glad of something myself."

They passed into the house, and, at Dickinson's request, Sybil was summoned to grace the board with her presence. She complied with her customary obedience; but during the repast no allusion was made to the stranger or the ambiguous conversation which had been held on the porch a little while before.

CHAPTER V.

A SHORT RIDE AND A LONG WALK.

Two days passed without any event worthy of record. Everything at the ranch went on quietly enough, and a stranger happening there might have

believed it an orderly and well-regulated family as any that could be found in the State.

The two men held long conversations in private. Even Sybil was not made acquainted with their cause; and although she was too acute not to have perceived that there was a secret from which she was excluded, she betrayed neither interest nor curiosity, evidently quite willing to allow affairs to take their course, and await the pleasure of her husband and his confederate to hear a disclosure of the scheme which they might be revolving in their minds.

On the third day the two made preparations to go up to the mines. Yates owned a claim which he did not work himself, for labor was not a thing he actually enjoyed, but he had hired men to work it, being able, even in that rage for gold which had taken possession of all, to find men who preferred secure daily wages to the uncertainty of working upon their own account.

Yates was in the habit of making weekly visits to the place, so that Sybil received the information of the departure as a matter of course, and supper was prepared before sunset, that they might make their journey during the cool of the evening.

The mules were brought out, and Sybil followed her husband and his friend out onto the veranda to see them mount and ride away.

"You will have a beautiful night," she said. "The wind blows cool and refreshing."

"You had better ride a little way with us, Mrs. Yates," said Dickinson.

"I would, but I have a headache," she answered, sweetly.

"Now, why can't you be honest and say you are glad to see us start?" returned her husband.

"Because I never tell stories," she replied, with her pleasant laugh; "I was always taught to consider it wicked."

"What heavenly principles!" sneered Yates. "I declare, Sybil, you are too good for this world."

"Well," exclaimed Tom, "She's needed in it, anyhow! Smart, handsome women are too scarce for her to be spared."

Sybil swept him a courtesy, and Yates laughed outright.

"Tom waxes gallant," said he. "You ought to be grateful, Syb, for his compliments. He isn't given to flattering you women, I can tell you."

"I am very grateful," she replied, giving Tom one of her flashing glances. "Admiration is as rare a thing in this region as Mr. Dickinson considers bright women."

Tom was quite abashed; like many another bad man, he was never at ease in the presence of a well-bred woman—and that Sybil was a lady no one could have denied; it was perceptible in every word and movement.

Yates had to go through his usual routine of male-dictions upon his servants and mules; then he mounted his own particular beast, blew a kiss to Sybil, and called out:

"Come, Tom, are you going to stand all night flirting with my wife, I should like to know?"

"What abominable things you do say!" exclaimed Tom, coloring like a girl, and making all haste to get onto his mule, by way of covering his confusion.

"Oh, Mr. Dickinson," said Sybil, "I would not have believed you so ungallant!"

"As how?" questioned Tom.

"You said that it was an abominable thing to admire me. Really, I am astonished!"

"That wasn't what I meant," he replied. "But you know I never can say what I want to, I'm such a stupid fool of a fellow—always was, among women-folks."

"There, Tom, that will do! You have got out of the scrape beautifully," said Yates, lending his friend's mule a cut with his black whip. "You have danced attendance on the Graces long enough for one day."

The mule started off with Dickinson at a sharp canter, and deprived him of an opportunity to reply

even if he had wished it. Yates gathered up his reins, nodded to Sybil, and prepared to follow.

"When shall I expect you?" she asked.

"To-morrow night, at the furthest. I only want to see how the men get on."

"Good-by, then, till to-morrow."

He rode away, and Sybil stood watching them for some time; but her face had lost the sweet expression which possessed so great a charm for Dickinson.

"How long must this continue?" she muttered.

"Will there never be an end? Oh, Sybil—Sybil! what a weak, miserable fool you have been! This is the end of your art and talent—a home in the wilderness, a gambler's wife! But it shall change—oh! it shall change, I say!"

She clasped her hands hard over her heart, gave one other glance toward the retreating riders, and entered the house. She went up to her own room, and remained there a long time.

At length she rose and glanced out of the window. The sun had set, and the twilight would have been gloomy and gray but for a faint glory heralding the moon which had not yet appeared in sight over the towering mountains.

"I must be gone!" she exclaimed. "I cannot bear this any longer—I should go crazy!"

She went to a chest of drawers that stood in a corner of the room, unlocked them, and took out a small and richly mounted revolver—one of those charming death trifles that Col. Colt has fashioned so exquisitely. It was so elaborate in its workmanship, and so delicately pretty, that it looked rather like a plaything than the dangerous implement it really was. But, small and fanciful as it was, the weapon would have been a dangerous instrument in the hands of that woman had interest or self-preservation rendered it necessary for her to use it.

She loaded the several barrels with dexterity and quickness, which betrayed a perfect knowledge of her task, locked the draws again, and hid the pistol in her pocket.

She put on a pretty gipsy hat, threw a mantle over her shoulders, and went out of her room, locking the door behind her that any one who chanced to try the door might suppose her occupied within. Downstairs she stole with her quick, stealthy tread, passed through the hall, and saw the men-servants at their supper in the kitchen, with the two Indian women obediently attending to their wants.

She gave one glance, retraced her steps, hurried out of the front door, and followed the path opposite that which her husband and his companion had taken an hour before.

She was speedily concealed from the view of those within the house by a thicket of almond-trees, and passed fearlessly and rapidly along the path which she had trodden in many a long walk when the wretched isolation of her life had become unendurable.

The night came on; the moon was up, giving forth a brilliant but fitful light, for a great troop of clouds were sweeping through the sky and at intervals obscured her beams completely, leaving only traces of struggling light on the edges of the clouds.

The path was rugged and broken—a greater portion of the way led through a heavy forest; but Sybil walked quickly on, disturbed by none of the forest sounds which might have terrified a less determined woman from following out the end she had set her heart upon.

The wind sighed mournfully among the great trees over her head and dashed the swaying vines against her face; but she resolutely pushed them aside and forced for herself a passage. Lonely night-birds sent forth their cries, so like human wails that they were fairly startling; noisome reptiles, disturbed by her approach, slid away through the gloom with venomous hisses; but still Sybil passed on, upright, defiant, her hand clenching the weapon concealed in her dress with a tight grasp, and her eyes flashing with the fearful enjoyment which the scene pro-

duced upon her mind, to which excitement was necessary as oxygen is to the air.

It would have been a singular study, the manner in which this woman's determination overcame her physical cowardice when any cause for prompt action was presented to her. Upon ordinary occasions nothing could have induced her to enter that wood after nightfall; but, under the influence of the insane desire which had been upon her for days, she trod its recesses as untremblingly as the boldest pioneer who ever crossed the Rocky Mountains could have done.

The greater portion of her way led along the bank of the stream, which flowed in the woods after breaking through the heart of the valley and forcing its way between the narrow of the mountains, that gave it an unwilling egress. The waters rung pleasantly in the shadow, but Sybil did not pause to listen, although her rare nature contained enough of ideality to have led her away into many a romance, had she been thrown among these picturesque shades when her mind was at rest.

It was a weary walk, but in her excitement Sybil thought little of the fatigue. She reached the end of her journey, at length. It was the ranch to which she had directed the party who came with that wounded man to ask shelter of her. Sybil did not go directly to the house. At a considerable distance from the dwelling was a rude hut where the family of one of the workmen lived. Sybil knew the woman; she had once taken a fancy to be very kind to a sick child of the poor creature, and that favor had never been forgotten.

When Sybil knocked at the door, a querulous voice bade her enter, and she went into the miserable abode. The woman was nursing her baby, and two older children sat crouching at her feet, munching black crusts of bread with the sharp appetite which follows a long fast. The room was so bare that it could hardly be called untidy; but the appearance of the female and her children was famished and miserable enough.

She started up—a haggard, raw-boned creature—with a cry at the sight of her visitor, exclaiming:

"Mrs. Yates!"

"Hush!" said Sybil, motioning her back. "I want to ask you a few questions, about which you are to say nothing to any living soul."

"I will," replied the woman. "You were good to my boy. I don't forget that."

Sybil waved that claim to consideration carelessly aside, and went on:

"There was a party of strangers at the house one night last week?"

"Yes," said the woman; "I was up at the ranch when they come in; they had been to your place, and said you wouldn't let them stop. I didn't believe it."

"Go on," said Sybil, breathlessly; she had waited for nearly a week to gain information—waited with the patience which was one of her most remarkable characteristics; but now that the moment was at hand, she could hardly give the woman time to speak.

"One of the gentlemen had a hurt—"

"Was the doctor here?"

"Yes; it wasn't nothing but a sprain."

"Are you certain?"

"Sartin of it, ma'am. They staid here that night and the next, he was quite well by that time, and then they went on—that's all I know about them; I wish it was more, if it could oblige you."

"That is enough," said Sybil.

She appeared satisfied; she had walked five miles through the forest to obtain those meager crumbs of information—braved dangers from which even a man might have shrunk; but in that lonely, miserable life of hers, it was something even to have gained those brief tidings.

A few more questions she asked: how the gentleman looked; if he had quite recovered; if the woman had heard him speak,

"Pretty much, ma'am, and he seemed as full of fun as a boy; I guess he didn't mind. Oh, them that's rich can afford to be funny, and folks say he's got a mighty heap of gold."

Sybil made no answer to the woman's remark, but sat for a time in silence, looking straight before her after her old fashion.

"I wish I could give you a bite to eat or drink," said the woman, "but we hain't got a living thing."

Sybil roused herself at once.

"I am in want of nothing," she said; "I must go home now."

"Dear me, you ain't rested; it's a hard ride."

Sybil did not inform her that she had come alone and on foot. She placed some money in the woman's hand, and said kindly, but with emphasis:

"You need not say that I have been here."

"Nobody'll ask," replied the woman; "if they did, it wouldn't do no good—I hain't forgot! Oh, ma'am, I ain't a good woman; I'm a poor, ignorant, bad-tempered critter, that Joe often says would be better off in my grave; but God bless you, that can't do you no harm, forlorn as I be. God bless you, ma'am!"

Sybil hurried away to escape the wound these words gave her. Her better feelings were aroused, and somehow that simple, uncouth benediction jarred upon her ear; it made her more nervous than she had been while threading her way through the lonely woods, and she hastened out into the night once more.

A changed had passed over the sky; great masses of heavy clouds were piled up against the horizon and scattered over the heavens, through which the moon rushed in frightened haste. The wind had fallen, and an oppressive sultriness superseded the cool of the woods which had been so apparent a few hours before. Once or twice distant peals of thunder rolled afar off, and the jagged edges of the precipice of clouds were colored with blue lightning.

Sybil struck into the path and took her way homeward. The feeling which supported her had in a measure subsided, and the fears natural to a place and scene like that began to force themselves on her imagination.

Since the day that Laurence and his party stopped at her house, she had been half mad to learn if his injury had proved of little consequence, and if he had been enabled to pursue his journey. There was no one at the ranch whom she dared to trust; for well she knew, although he had not again alluded to the subject, that her husband was watching every movement, and that the slightest show of anxiety on her part would be followed by a repetition of cruelties that since her marriage and removal to that wild place had been of frequent occurrence. She was afraid of this now, and fear took its usual result, craft and concealment. She had borne her fears and suffering in silence up to this time; but when Yates left home, so keen was her anxiety that she could not have lived another hour without starting forth to obtain such information as could be gathered; had the distance been quadrupled she would have undertaken the journey, for in that mood no danger or fatigue could have deterred her.

Long before Sybil reached the edge of the forest the clouds had gathered force, and swept up to the very zenith; suddenly the moon plunged down behind them, and the woods were buried in darkness. The thunder pealed out again, rolling and booming through the heavens like parks of artillery, terrible flashes of lightning ran like fiery serpents through the clouds, and made every object fearfully distinct. Every shrub and tree took spectral shapes. The path seemed to lose itself in dizzy windings, and Sybil could only cover her face with both hands and rush blindly on, terrified but still courageous.

Great drops of rain began to fall; the thunder increased in violence, and the lightning flashes succeeded each other in such rapid succession that the whole forest was wrapped in flame. Still Sybil hurried on, panting for breath, half crazy with fear,

and keeping the path more from instinct than any thought or power of reason.

The storm grew stronger, gathered its mighty powers among the gorges, and surged up into one of those fearful tempests which desolate mountain regions so suddenly. The wind howled through the forest, the thunder pealed and broke directly overhead, and renewed lightning leaped and blazed before her very eyes till she was blinded and stunned. There was no hope of shelter; the thickets which lined the path might conceal wild beasts, frightened into seeking refuge within their depths, but to her they threatened death; she could only totter on, feeling her strength fail with every gust of the storm beat against her. Many times her feet struck against fragments of broken rocks, or became entangled in the rank vines, which brought her heavily to the ground, tearing her garments and bruising her limbs; but in her fright and anguish she did not heed the pain, and, catching at the branches for support, would stagger to her feet again, and plunge on through the darkness, growing more and more desperate each moment. Her drenched garments clung about her form like a shroud—the cold touch made her shudder; and when, in a sudden pause of the tempest, a great owl rushed past her with his ill-omened cry, her senses almost forsook her in the fright. She heard the cracking of branches, the thunder of giant trees, as they came crashing to the earth, and their mangled boughs fell close to her as she tottered on. Long briers, blown out into the road, tore her face and pierced her arms; she shrieked with fear as she forced herself away from their clutches, that were like the talons of wild animals tearing at her life.

The tempest was of short duration; suddenly as it had sprung up the wind died in the depths of the forest; the rain ceased; the black wall of clouds tottered and crumbled against the horizon, breaking away like mountains in a dream.

As Sybil left the wood, the moon soared up again from the prison of clouds where it had been confined, and the night grew serene and quiet, as if no blast had swept through it.

Feeble, weary and faint, Sybil toiled on until she reached her home. The lights were out, the doors fastened, but she had means of entrance, and made her way up to the chamber so stealthily that even the great dogs who bayed and kept watch upon the veranda were not disturbed by her tread.

Once in her room, and feeling that she was safe, the desperation that had nerved her gave way, and she fell a dead weight upon the floor. She had not fainted, but it was a long time before she could find strength to rise; her limbs were stiffened—her very heart was chilled. She could only lie there, staring out at the moon, while her troubled senses heard still the roar of the tempest, and dismal shapes came out of the gloom to torture her more sorely than the storm had done—cold specters from the past that refused to lie quiet in their graves; painful memories, blighted hopes—every sight and sound from which her tortured soul strove to escape but had no power—she could only look through her strained, glaring eyes, and watch the pale procession in its course.

She shook off the weakness and that terrible fear, at last; struggled to her feet, threw off her drenched garments, and crept into bed chilled and trembling, only to renew in sleep the mournful images from which she had tried to escape during her waking hours.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WELCOME THAT AWAITS RALPH MINCHLEY.

ON the appointed day, Yates and his companion returned home. Sybil went down to meet them as calm and smiling as though the season of their absence had been fraught with no incident of interest, or no terrible conflict had shaken her whole soul to its center. True, very little had happened in acts; but the greatest changes of life occur when all is

still. Supper was over, and Sybil had gone up to her room, leaving the two men smoking upon the veranda. There was a low, eager conversation between them after her departure. At length Dickinson raised his voice:

"You had better go now and talk to her."

"Oh, these women," muttered Yates; "there's no telling how she may take any thing."

"She'll take it as you would," replied Dickinson. "Be careful how you tell your story—don't frighten her at first. Why, you may bring a woman to any thing if you don't upset her nerves at the start."

"You are wonderfully wise," mused Yates.

Tom did not seem inclined to provoke a discussion, and after a little hesitation Yates went into the house and mounted the stairs.

He entered Sybil's chamber abruptly, and found her, as usual, seated in a low chair by the window.

"I want to talk to you a little," he said, "and I expect you to act like a sensible woman."

"Let me hear," she answered.

"It's a short story," said he, bluntly. "To-morrow night, then, a man will stop here loaded with money and dust enough to make us all rich for the rest of our lives."

"Well?" The red lips lost their color, and shut hard together; that cruel light shot into the blue eyes.

"It isn't well," retorted Yates, angrily. "He won't drink, and he won't gamble; so what's to be done? Tom talks about taking the fellow in hand."

"No, no," interrupted Sybil, putting up her hands as if to shut out some horrible object. "I have not forgotten San Francisco—don't talk of it, Philip."

"I knew that would be the way!" he exclaimed.

"I was a fool to tell you of it. No woman can be trusted when it comes to the pinch; but that goes, Tom, and you would take it kindly, and be the first to hit on some plan that would settle every thing."

"I will help you as I always have," she said, trembling violently; "but not that—oh! heavens, no."

"There, there, you foolish child!" he replied, not patiently. "That wasn't your fault or mine; the men got to quarreling in the house, and we killed the other—"

"But it was so terrible; that dying man's face has haunted me ever since—I can see his eyes staring, and hear his breath struggling and gasping—"

"—him clenching and tearing at his throat—"

"Don't, for God's sake!" he exclaimed, catching hold of her; "you'll drive a man mad!"

She had risen from her seat, and was pointing wildly at the floor as she spoke, but his voice seemed to recall her to herself. She sank back into her chair panting for breath, while Yates vainly endeavored to conceal his own discomposure.

"You will go crazy in one of these abominable fits," he said, brushing his hand across his forehead, and sweeping the great drops of perspiration away.

"Then don't bring such memories back," she shuddered.

After all, the woman was the first to regain her usual manner, while Yates walked slowly up and down the room, his mind divided between the recollections her words had aroused and the plans which had been arranged during the past days.

"So we must give it up," he said, at length, "and all for your confounded folly."

"Do you call it folly?" cried Sybil, with a miserable specter of a laugh.

"Yes, I do! There is one thing certain; your obstinacy and cowardice will lengthen your stay here by ten good years."

"I am not a coward—"

"Call yourself what you please! I say, before we can afford to leave this place, the youth will be gone out of your face, the brightness from your eyes—"

"You'll be an old woman, Sybil."

She did not appear moved by his threats, and, as was customary with him when thwarted, he began to pass into a violent rage. She did not answer the harsh words and maledictions which he heaped upon

her; but once, when he made a movement as if to give her a blow, as had often happened before, she turned upon him with something in her face from which he shrunk in spite of himself.

"Don't do that!" she exclaimed, in an awful whisper; "I warn you never to attempt that again!"

The victory was more nearly won to her than it had been for many a day. Yates dropped his hand and turned to go out.

"Well, let everything slide," he said; "this comes of trusting a woman with secrets! I must sit in my chair and see sixty thousand dollars good slip out of my hands, and Ralph Hinchley go by without lifting a finger."

Sybil sprung forward and clutched his arm; the face she bent toward him was like that of a corpse.

"Speak that name again," she whispered; "speak it."

"Ralph Hinchley," he repeated, pushing her aside with a feeling like absolute fear. "Confound you, what do you look like that for?"

Sybil still held him fast, and her voice rung out hollow and unnatural:

"Why, if you murder him, I will avenge it; so God help us both!"

"What is he to you? Do you know him?"

She forced back the whirlwind of passion, and stood up cold and white.

"I never saw him," she replied; "but if you wish his money, I shall not stand between you and him; his life you shall not take."

"Are you in earnest?"

She answered him with a look.

"But we have not settled on that; I propose to follow him—"

"Fools!" exclaimed Sybil. "To-morrow night the house and the valley will be full of mad and drunken men. There may be half a dozen robberies—will one more make any great difference?"

"What a woman you are!" exclaimed Yates, with that sort of admiring dread with which a bad man watches a superior in coldness and courage. "It will be impossible to say who did it! What a mind you have when it works in earnest."

"There will be a score of people here wanting lodgings to-morrow night; surely, your way is clear."

She waved him impatiently off when he would have pursued the subject.

"Go down-stairs," she said; "I am tired of this. I am coming in a moment."

He went out. She stood still in the gloom, while that terrible look of ferocity came back to her face.

"Either of them, or both," she muttered; "I don't care! Hinchley is Margaret's cousin—Sybil Yates will save him; but not till they have gone far enough to prove the attempt. Then let them arrest Philip if they will—oh! I am sick of this life, and do so loathe him."

She swept out of the room, cold and stern as a Nemesis, descending to the presence of those men who sat together whispering of things which they dared not speak aloud. They had excited themselves with drink; but Sybil was not afraid to look the reality in the face—her resolve was taken, she would not falter. If she reasoned with her conscience it was thus: "The plan is not mine—I could not help it. These men are false and desperate; I can guide but not defeat them. When it is done—oh, how my heart beats; its chains are falling off. His petty sins shall bind me here no longer."

CHAPTER VII.

ARRIVAL OF THE GUEST.

It was Saturday evening; the moon rose upon a scene which utterly changed the whole aspect of the ranch.

Since early in the afternoon the road from the mines had been filled with men, who poured down into the valley to seek relaxation after their week's successful toil, and relieve themselves, perhaps, of every ounce of the yellow dust which they had labored so hard to gain.

About the tents and cabins were crowded scores

of men from every nation of the civilized world. Long tables had been set out in the open air, covered with such food as the owners of the huts could procure; barrels of liquor were standing under the trees, ready broached, and moist at the tap from frequent applications.

A great fire had been kindled near the cabins, at which quarters of beef, joints of venison, and groups of wild game were roasting with a slow success that filled the air with appetizing odors. In fact, the whole valley took the appearance of a political barbecue or Gipsy encampment. The miners, in slouched hats, red shirts, and muddy boots, gave picturesque effect to the scene which a philosopher would have condemned and an artist forgiven at the first glance.

The ranch had its full share of visitors; food and drink were bountifully provided, Yates and Dickinson moved about among the men, excited by liquor and evil passions, and urging them on to every species of excess, like fiends seeking to drag down humanity to their own base level.

Secure in her chamber, Sybil listened to the tumult and smiled quietly. She really had something in common with Lucretia Borgia besides the golden tint in her hair. She was neither shocked nor afraid; but had grown so accustomed to such scenes that they no longer had any power to affect her.

She was sitting by her window, and looking toward the path which led from the mountains, so absorbed in thought that she scarcely heard the shouts and hideous din which ascended from below.

At last she beheld two men on horseback coming down the declivity, preceded by a guide. No trace of exultation lit up her features; the face grew more hard and stern; the peculiar look which gave such age to her countenance settled over its whiteness—that was all. She clenched her hands on the window-sill, and watched their approach.

"Margaret's cousin," she whispered, once; "well, hereafter in my dreams I shall be worthy her thanks—she was fond of him—shedding tears—yes, yes, it is my turn now!"

The men rode slowly on, and as they reached the foot of the mountain, and the demoniac scene, lighted by the moon and the glare of the camp-fires, burst upon them, they simultaneously checked their horses, and looked at each other in horrified astonishment.

"Great heavens, what a sight!" exclaimed Hinchley.

"It's like going down into purgatory," muttered the domestic. "Shall we have to spend the night here, Mr. Hinchley?"

"You can't do no better," interrupted the guide; "it's the same thing clear to Wilson's ranch. You'll do well enough at Phil Yates's; he promised you rooms and beds to yourselves—you'd best come on."

The guide looked eagerly about as he spoke, his savage nature in a state of pleasurable excitement, and anxious to join the desperate crowds that were scattered through the valley.

"I wish we had stopped at the diggin's," Hinchley said.

The guide had stepped away from them, and they conversed for a few seconds in private.

"Luckily, nobody knows we've got the money and dust with us," said the man.

"That is true. I dare say we are quite as safe in this crowd as we should be alone with the people that live at Wilson's house. You must keep a good look-out all night, Martin; I will see that our rooms are close together. If we are assailed we must do our best."

There was no time for further conversation; the guide summoned them impatiently, and they rode on toward the ranch, passing several camp-fires, about which were grouped evil-looking men drinking and gambling, some upon the ground, some upon the newly-made stumps from which the forest-trees had been cut.

Nobody paid much attention to them, and they passed on up to the house, where Yates received them with a rough courtesy which was in a measure reassuring, compared with the appearance of the crowds they had seen.

"You have hit on a bad night," he said, as he conducted them into the house; "but I will give you rooms up-stairs—you will be quiet enough there."

"Show us to them at once," said Hinchley; "I am fairly sick with this disgusting scene."

"I used to feel so," returned Yates; "but a man gets accustomed to any thing in these regions."

He led them through the hall and up the stairs, the servant carrying the saddle bags and packages. They were shown into a comfortable room, which, in comparison with the scene they had left, appeared like a palace.

"You will do very well here," said Yates. "That next room is for your man. I'll have some supper sent up to you. I don't keep a tavern, anyhow, but those rascals below would tear my house down about my ears if I refused them admittance. It's nothing when you are acquainted with California life."

"I'm blessed if I don't hope my acquaintance 'll be a short one," muttered Martin.

Yates laughed as he left the room, and Hinchley threw himself into a chair, wearied with many days' privation and hard riding.

"I guess we're safe enough here," said Martin.

"Oh, yes; I apprehend no danger at all."

While they waited for their supper, and listened to the horrible din below, Yates went on to the room where Sybil was seated.

"They have come," he whispered, going close to where she sat.

"I know it," she replied, quietly.

"You don't feel afraid, Sybil? You won't draw back?"

"If" she laughed in her scornful way.

"Stop that noise!" exclaimed Yates, with a menacing gesture; "you laugh like a ghost."

Mad as he was with liquor and evil passions there was something so unnatural in that sound that it half sobered him.

While they stood eying each other, the door opened and Dickinson reeled into the room.

"Come down-stairs, Phil," he said; "there 'll have to be another barrel of whisky got out."

"You are drunk," said the other.

"A man needs to be," he shivered. "Good heavens, Mrs. Yates, how you look!"

"Never mind that," she answered. "Go, both of you, and do your best to keep that crowd of demons occupied."

"They are mighty good-natured with us," said Tom. "That idea of yours, Sybil, of giving them the liquor, has set us up wonderfully; hark! they're cheering Phil now."

Sybil flung up the window, and leaned over the sill, as shout after shout arose like the yelling of fiends.

Dickinson pulled her hastily back.

"Don't let them see you—no woman would be safe! I have told everybody you had gone down to Featherstone's."

"No, keep yourself close, Sybil," said Yates.

"Do not fear for me; go down-stairs, both of you. I want to be alone."

"What time do you think—"

It was Dickinson who began to speak; she checked the broken utterance with a look.

"At the time I appointed; half past one."

She looked from one to the other, but neither of those hardened men had the nerve to meet her eyes. They shrunk out of the room in silence, without another word being spoken, and once more Sybil was alone.

The riot and confusion increased. Men rushed about like demons, singing, shouting and clashing their cups together. The veranda and grass in front were covered with poor wretches, who had fallen there in their intoxication, and were recklessly

trampled upon by their companions. Yells and shrieks went up, shot after shot was fired, knives gleamed in the starlight, more than one fierce contest occurred, but through it all that woman sat at her window and waited, appalled neither by the horror of the scene, nor the fearful thoughts which surged through her soul.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GAMBLER'S FATE.

It was long past midnight, and something of quiet had stolen over the valley; yet that very stillness, taken in connection with the scene, was more impressive than the riot and tumult had been.

The lower rooms of Yates's dwelling were in a state of confusion beyond description. Glasses, dishes and broken food had been swept to the floor to give place to cards and dice, which began the instant the wolf-like appetites of the men had been satisfied. The floor was covered with broken bottles and saturated with liquor and costly wines; here and there darker stains gleamed in the moonlight, betraying where some deadly fray had ended just short of murder. Men lay stretched upon the tables in heavy slumber, huddled among the chairs and under the benches, either asleep or so deeply intoxicated as to be unconscious of their degradation. Here and there scattered gold shone out from the stains and pools of wine, and a few wretches groped about picking up stray nuggets or scraping together the saturated gold-dust and hiding it in their garments.

In some of the rooms groups of men were still busy over the cards, but even these had relapsed into quiet; nothing was heard but the rattle of the dice or an occasional oath from the lips of some ruined gambler.

Out of doors the scene was still different. The whole length of the valley could be commanded in one view—the smoldering camp-fires; men lying stretched upon the trampled grass; poor wretches, wounded in the quarrels, who had dragged themselves under the shadow of the great trees to bind up their wounds or seek the slumber of exhaustion and spent passions. Over all shone the moon, pouring down a cloud of silvery radiance upon the repulsive scene, and rendering it more horrible from the pure contrast.

At one of the card-tables Yates was still seated, while Dickinson hovered about, unable to remain quiet for a moment, and, in spite of his partial intoxication, haggard and pale at the recollection of the deed yet to be performed.

A meaning glance from Yates sent him out of the room. Very soon his confederate flung down the cards, and relinquishing his place to some other sleepless desperado, made his way among the forms huddled upon the floor, and passed into the hall.

No one was watching; the stillness deepened each instant. Up the stairs passed the two men, and entered the room where Sybil awaited them.

Few words passed among them, but the woman was much less shaken than either of those bold men. They stood for a short time conversing in broken whispers; then Yates turned quickly aside, moved to the end of the room where a tall wardrobe was placed. A single touch upon a secret spring, and the heavy piece of furniture swung noiselessly out, affording admittance to the chamber beyond.

Ralph Hinchley started from a troubled dream to feel a strange oppression upon his chest—a sweet, sickening odor pervading the atmosphere—and to see through the open door Martin lying upon the bed with a man bending over him and pressing a napkin close against his face.

He started up in bed, unable to realize whether it was real or only another wild vision. A blow from an unseen hand dashed him back upon the pillow; but as he fell, with a smothered cry, he saw a white face bending over him, and in the doorway a woman enveloped in a mantle, which concealed her features and most of her person, uttering cries for help.

He started up again with frantic violence, shrieking out his servant's name:

"Martin! Martin!"

He heard a cry from the woman:

"Help! help!"

Then his assailant sprung upon him. Hinchley grappled him with all the fury of desperation, and the two rolled over and over in deadly strife. The man who had kept guard by the servant's bed escaped at the first tumult; but those two men continued that fearful conflict. Hinchley was a brave man; the belief that his life was at stake gave him the strength of a tiger. He shrieked for help in a voice which rung through the house and roused even the intoxicated sleepers below.

There was a sound in the halls of eager voices and rapid feet. Hinchley's assailant tried to dash him to the floor and escape; but those long, slender arms seemed made of iron, and held him pinioned.

At that moment the servant woke from the stupor, which had only taken a partial effect upon his senses, and sprung up with a mad cry.

"Help, Martin, help!" shrieked Hinchley, feeling his strength begin to fail. "Come, I say!"

Half-stupefied as he was, the man comprehended his master's danger, rushed upon their foe, and hurled him back upon the floor just as he succeeded in escaping from Hinchley's hold.

This instant the door was broken open, and a crowd of infuriated men rushed into the chamber, roused by those shrieks for aid.

A few quick words explained the whole affair. The troop pushed Hinchley and his servant back, seized the man and dragged him toward the window. The moonlight fell broadly on his terror-stricken face.

"It's Phil Yates!" exclaimed a score of voices.

The wretch had ceased to struggle; he felt that his doom was sealed, and lay panting and passive in their clutches.

"This accounts for his good-nature," resounded on all sides. "This explains the general treat. He meant to stupefy us and then shirk the murder on some one."

"Where's Tom?" called one of their number.

A rush was made through the rooms, but the confederate had escaped.

"At least we will serve this fellow out!" cried a hoarse voice.

"Ay! ay!" they shouted, "down-stairs with him. There's a blasted pine back of the house—just the thing!"

They gathered about the shuddering man like wild beasts scenting their prey. Hinchley in vain attempted to speak a word which might gain the miserable man a reprieve. They pushed him rudely aside, dragged their victim down the stairs and out upon the veranda, the throng parting right and left, allowing those who held him free passage.

In an instant the whole valley seemed aroused, and hundreds of fierce faces glared on the hapless creature as he hung powerless over the shoulders of his captors.

There was a hurried consultation among those nearest the criminal; terrible words broke from their lips which were echoed in husky whispers by the whole crowd.

"Hang him! hang him!"

Again the crowd parted, and four stalwart men dragged the insensible creature round a corner of the house and moved toward a shivered pine-tree that stretched out its blasted limbs between the dwelling and the precipice.

"We want a rope," some one said.

A man rushed out of the house, carrying a long crimson scarf, which he fluttered over the heads of the crowd.

"This will do famously!" he called. "It belongs to his wife—she was huddling it over her face."

"Where is the woman?" they yelled. "Let's exterminate every snake in the nest!"

"She isn't on hand—twisted herself out of my

hand like a cat, dashed off to the precipice, and the last I saw of her she was dragging herself up by the bushes."

"Dickinson is gone, too."

"No matter; we have this one safe. Gracious, how limpsy he is!"

"Make short work of it, then, before he shows fight."

"Never fear!" shouted one of his captors. "Say a prayer, you villain; it is your last chance."

The hapless wretch only moaned; fear had drawn him beyond the power of speech. Closer gathered the crowd—he felt their breath hot upon his cheek; hundreds of fierce eyes glared into his own; innumerable voices roared out his death-sentence. It was a terrible scene.

They seized the scarf and twisted it fiercely about his neck; scores of ruthless hands forced him toward the skeleton tree; the shouts and execrations grew more fiendish, and over all the sinking moon shed her last pale luster, lighting up that work of horror.

The man had spoken truly. Sybil Yates had fled to the hill. With the first cries of Hinchley, she had attempted to escape from the principal entrance. But the valley was sprinkled with camp-fires which must betray her. In front of the house, lanterns swung from the knotted cedar-posts, and cast their unsteady light on a crowd of fierce men swarming toward the cries that still rung through the dwelling. One of these men saw her, and, leaping up the stairs, tore the scarf from her head, bringing a flood of hair down with it. She wratched herself from the grasp he fastened on her arm, plunged down a back staircase, and, darting by the blasted pine, made for the precipice.

The face of this rocky wall was torn apart near the base, and the fissure, which slanted across the face of the precipice, choked up with myrtle-bushes, grape-vines and trees, stunted in their growth from want of soil; but it was deep enough to hide that poor human creature flying for her life. She ran toward the broken line which betrayed the fissure, and, crushing through the sweet myrtle-bushes, fastened her foot in a coil of vines, and crept upward with that scared face turned over her shoulder, unable to tear her eyes from the crowd of men that came sweeping round the house and surged up to that gaunt pine-tree.

They carried lanterns, and torches of burning pine, throwing a red light all around and illuminating the very foot of the precipice. Sybil crowded herself back into the fissure and dragged the vines over her. Then, shuddering until the foliage trembled around her, she looked through it, ghastly with fear but fascinated still. There was the man who had been her fate, the cruel tyrant whose breath had made her tremble an hour ago, lying across the shoulders of his late friends, already half lifeless, yet shrieking faintly from dread of the death to which they were lighting him.

The woman was seized with dizzy terror. The lights flowed before her eyes in a river of fire. The specters of a thousand gaunt old trees danced through it, and among them swung a human form to and fro, to and fro, as it would sway through her memory forever and ever. She was pressed against the rock, her foot tangled in the coiling vines, her hands clenched hard among the tender shrubs—but for that she must have fallen headlong to the broken rocks beneath.

All at once the tumult ceased; a frightful stillness came over that dark crowd; men shrunk away from its outskirts into the darkness, frightened by their own demon work. She clung to the vines and looked down dizzily; a feeling of horrible relief came over her. She turned her face to the rock, and held her breath, listening, as if the voices could still reach her.

It was near morning before the crowd around that tree dispersed. Then she crept feebly down the rocky fissure, and stood trembling on the trampled grass. One glance upon the pine, and she turned away, sick at heart. A fragment of her own red scarf fluttered there—and—and—

Shutting her eyes close, Sybil staggered on toward the house, entered the back door, and descended the

cellar-stairs. She took a lamp and some matches from a niche in the wall, and passed on into the cellar. She had been there once before within the last forty-eight hours, and everything necessary for her flight was prepared.

Connected with the cellars was a small natural cave, which had been used as a place to keep liquor-casks. Sybil and her husband alone knew of the real use to which this place was put.

Only a few moments after, Sybil stood in that cave so metamorphosed that she might have passed unquestioned, even by her best friend.

She was attired in the dress of a Spanish sailor, her delicate skin dyed of a rich, dark brown, her golden hair concealed under a slouch hat, beneath which were visible short, thick curls of raven hair.

There was still other work to be done. Carefully shading her lamp from the draught of air, the woman moved toward a corner of the vault, pulled away several heavy casks, which it would have seemed beyond her power to lift, raised one of the flat stones with which a portion of the vault had been paved, and disclosed the lid of an iron chest.

She unlocked it, flung up the top lid, and the lamp-light struck upon a quantity of gold-dust and money which had been concealed there.

Yates had collected that store without the knowledge of his confederates; even Sybil had discovered this secret by accident.

"Oh!" she muttered, impatiently, "there is a fortune here. I can not carry it. No matter, it is safe—only let me escape this spot. Some other time. It can not be found. Some other time."

She took out as many pieces of gold as she could manage to bestow about her person without incumbering her flight; but even in her distress and danger, her judgment and reason were capable of action. It was better to leave the money in safety, and return for it at some future time, than to overload herself so much that her flight would be impeded. She might become so weary of the weight as to be forced to fling it aside. Thus the woman reasoned only a few hours after that death scene.

She closed the chest, locked it and replaced the stones, piled the empty boxes in their former position, and crept away. She extinguished the little lamp, flung it into a dark corner of the cellar, and bent her steps toward the opening, which was so overgrown with weeds that it was entirely hidden.

She managed to raise herself along the broken wall, and forced her way through the narrow aperture into the open air. Her face and hands were bleeding from the wounds she had received against the sharp stones, but she felt no pain.

She was completely hidden from the view of all those about the house by a dense thicket of cactus and flowering shrubs, which formed a thick wall for a considerable distance. Her pony was tied to a tree where she had herself stationed him early in the evening. For the first time a look of exultation shot into her face—she was safe now!

Before mounting her horse, she crept along the edge of the thicket to a spot from whence she could command a view of the house.

The crowd was still rushing wildly about—she could hear their murmurs and execrations. The moon had set, but the cold dawn cast a gray light over the landscape.

Sybil turned her eyes toward the dwelling. She saw the pine tree, that one projecting branch from which a fragment of the silk scarf fluttered yet.

After that momentary glance she started up, mounted her pony, and rode rapidly away through the forest.

The day broke, still and calm. The first glow of the sun tinged the mountain tops, leaving the valley still in deep shadow. The excited throng moved restlessly about, and at length group after group started away from the house, anxious to escape the sickening sight which met their eyes; now that their fury was satiated, they turned in dread away.

The sun mounted higher in the heavens, shot daz-

zingly against the sides of the mountains, colored the noisy torrent, and played softly about the old house.

Not a living thing was in sight. The sun played over the grass, rustled the vines, and there, in the silence and amid the shadows, hung that still form, swayed slowly to and fro by the light breeze that struck the branches.

An hour passed, but there was no change!

Afar through the forest rode the fearless woman, seeking a place of shelter. The last fetter which had bound her to that horrible life was severed. Across the dark sea she could seek a new home, and make for herself another existence, untroubled by a single echo from the past.

CHAPTER IX.

A CANTER AND A FALL.

"It was a lofty, well-lighted apartment, fitted up with book-cases, yet, from its general arrangement, evidently occupied as much for a sitting-room as a library.

The easy-chairs were pushed into commodious corners, the reading-table, in the center of the floor, was covered with newspapers and pamphlets; but they had been partially moved aside to afford place to a tiny work-basket, an unstrung guitar with a handful of flowers scattered over it, and various other trifles—all giving token of a female presence and occupations, which alone can lend to an apartment like this a pleasant, home-like appearance.

It was near sunset; two of the windows of the library looked toward the west, and a rich glow stole through the parted curtains, from the mass of gorgeous clouds piling themselves rapidly up against the horizon.

But at the further end of the room, the shadows lay heavy and dark, and two statues gleamed out amid the gloom, like ghosts frightened away from the sunlight.

In that dimness a woman walked slowly to and fro, her hands linked loosely together, her dress and figure faintly against the carpet, and her every movement betraying some deep and engrossing thought.

For a full half-hour she had indulged in that reverie, all the while moving slowly up and down, the fixed resolution of her face growing harder, and her eyes turned resolutely toward the shadows, as if there was something in the cheerful radiance at the other end of the room which caused her pain or annoyance.

In that dim light, the countenance had an expression from which one entering unperceived would have shrunk instinctively; yet a portrait of the face, painted as it appeared among the shadows, would hardly have been recognized by those daily accustomed to a view of the features.

Perhaps it was the gloom around which gave the face that look—cold, hard, unrelenting force—and lent the eyes that subtle, dangerous gleam.

Some noise from without disturbed her reflections; she dropped her arms to her side, and paced quietly toward the middle of the room. As she stood for an instant by the table, the rosy light of the approaching sunset played full upon her face; it scarcely seemed possible it could be the one which looked so dark and cruel among the shadows only a moment before.

An erect, well-proportioned figure, rather below the medium height, yet so graceful and elegant that at the first glance one would have pronounced her tall. She was still quite young, out of her teens possibly, but no one would have judged her twenty-one—in the twilight her face had appeared ten years older at least.

The features were finely cut, the lips a trifle too thin, perhaps, but the complexion was wonderfully delicate; rich masses of light brown hair, which in the sunlight took a golden tinge, were brushed in wavy folds back from the smooth, low forehead, underneath which the gray eyes looked out as calm and cold as though deep emotion had never brought shadows or tears into their depths.

It would have been a very acute observer that could have read that pale, secretive face. One might have lived years in daily intercourse with her, and never believed her anything but a quiet person, yielding herself good-naturedly to the plans or amusements of others, and finding sufficient content therein.

While she stood by the table, the tramp of horses sounded upon the gravel sweep without; she moved to the window, and remained watching the groom as he led a couple of saddle-horses up and down before the side-entrance of the house.

Very soon there was a sound of opening doors, and a man's voice called from the hall:

"Margaret! Miss Waring!"

The lady started at those clear, somewhat imperative tones, but the summons was evidently not intended for her; after that involuntary movement, she resumed her former attitude, leaning against the window-sill with her eyes fixed absently upon the changing sky.

In a moment the door of the library opened, and a gentleman advanced a step or two beyond the threshold, looking around as if in search of some one. When he saw the young lady standing there, he said, hastily:

"I thought Margaret was here."

She turned as if for the first time conscious of his presence.

"I beg your pardon; what did you wish?"

"I am looking for Miss Waring; I heard George bring up the horses several moments since."

"I believe she is in her room; shall I call her?"

"Pray do not trouble yourself, Miss Chase. I dare say she will be down immediately."

"Here I am now," said a voice from the stairs, and a young lady very pretty and well-dressed entered the room dressed in a riding-habit. "I hope I have not kept you waiting, Mr. Laurence."

"I am only just ready," he replied, carelessly.

Miss Chase half turned from the window; the sunset rays fell upon her hair and forehead, and, partially shut in by the folds of the curtains, she made an exceedingly striking picture.

Margaret was buttoning her gauntlets, but Laurence caught the effect, and was pleased to say one with the slightest artistic taste must have seen.

"You have not put on your habit, Miss Chase," he said. "Don't you like it?"

"I made my excuse to Miss Waring ten minutes ago," she replied, in the sweet, calm voice habitual with her.

"She has a bad headache," said the young lady mentioned, looking up from her task, "and is bent on a solitary walk in hopes of curing it."

"I thought you were never troubled with such pretty little female ailments," returned Laurence, pleasantly.

"It is very seldom happens," answered Miss Chase, indifferently, turning more toward the window, as if she did not wish any conversation to deprive her of a view of the sunset.

"It seems a little selfish for us to leave you to a lonely walk," he continued.

"So I told her," added Margaret; "but she would not be persuaded."

"I would not prevent your ride for the world," she said, in precisely the same unmoved tone. "I shall only walk to the gates and back."

"I am sorry you can not accompany us," Laurence said. "I suppose that wretched headache will prevent me taking my revenge at chess to-night."

"Hardly, I think; it will go off in the cool of the evening."

"You are very obliging—"

"Oh, she means to beat you unmercifully," interrupted Margaret; "don't you, Miss Chase?"

"If I can, of course," she replied, with a little deprecatory gesture, as if the attempt were likely to prove a hopeless one.

"We shall see," returned the gentleman. "Come,

Margaret, the horses will get restless. A pleasant walk, Miss Chase."

She bowed, and watched the pair out of the room; when the door closed, she took her old station, saw them mount and ride swiftly down the avenue.

Very quiet and still she stood there—there was no pulsation strong enough even to stir the lace upon her bosom. One hand fell at her side, the other was pressed hard against the marble sill, and once more the cold, fixed resolution crept slowly over her countenance.

It must have been a full half-hour before she in turn left the apartment. She went up to her room, came down with her bonnet and shawl on, and walked out upon the broad veranda which ran the whole length of the house.

She did not follow the avenue which led from the dwelling down to the highway, but took one of the numerous paths which wound among the shrubberies. Sometimes in the full glory of the waning sunset, anon a darker shadow among the other shadows that lay under the trees, she passed, walking rapidly, as if anxious to find quiet in bodily fatigue—then forgetting her purpose, if it had been present to her mind, and moving slowly along, deeply engrossed in thought as when she stood in the library an hour before.

It was already twilight when Sybil Chase reached the ponderous iron gates which gave entrance from the road to the grounds. She seated herself upon a stone bench a little off from the avenue, and gazed quietly around with that observing eye which never lost the most minute particular.

The air was soft and warm, the moon was already coming up and dispelling the dusky shadows sufficiently to distinguish objects at a considerable distance. The murmur of a little brook that traversed the grounds and came out of the thicket back of her seat was pleasantly audible, and the deafened cry of a whippowill sounded through the distance. The moon rose higher, the repose of the spring evening increased, and through the distance Sybil's quick ear detected the tramp of horses, faint but rapidly approaching nearer.

She rose from the bench and looked up the road. She saw Margaret and Mr. Laurence cantering gayly over the nearest hill. While she looked, the girl's horse shied at some object by the road—started so violently that his rider, evidently taken by surprise, was thrown to the ground.

Sybil Chase pressed her two hands hard together, a quick breath broke from her lips, and her eyes looked out large and wild; but she made no effort to go forward—never stirred from her attitude of strange expectancy.

Before Mr. Laurence could dismount and go to his companion's assistance, a man rode rapidly up behind them. Sybil saw him stop, spring from his horse, and hasten with Mr. Laurence toward the lady. Before they reached the spot, Margaret had risen; through the stillness Sybil caught the echo of hurried exclamations, a gay laugh from the young girl, which seemed to give assurance that she had suffered no injury.

At that sound the lady whispered a few words to herself, then, after an instant of hesitation, hurried toward the gates, pushed them open, and ran with all her speed toward the foot of the hill.

Before she reached the first rise, the three had mounted and were riding toward her; she was plainly visible to them in the moonlight, toiling rapidly up the ascent, and apparently so overcome by agitation that nothing but a desire to be of service preserved her strength.

"Are you hurt?" she called, wildly.

"Not in the least," Margaret answered, while Laurence waved his riding-cap gayly in the air.

Sybil clasped her hands, as if in involuntary thanksgiving and sunk down upon the bank.

They rode toward her; as they reached the spot, she rose and called again:

"You are not hurt, Miss Waring?"

"Not in the least, I assure you."

"Not even frightened, I believe," added Laurence. "I thought she was killed," exclaimed Sybil. "Oh, that dreadful shying horse! Don't—don't ride him again, Margaret."

The party drew rein near her.

"He meant no harm, poor fellow," returned Margaret.

"He might have killed you, nevertheless," said Sybil, with a sort of reproachful anxiety.

She spoke rapidly, and appeared much alarmed; nevertheless, she found time to steal a quick glance toward the stranger who accompanied her friends. As her eyes fell upon him she gave a slight start, and her face grew pale; but, with a strong effort, she mastered the emotion, and turned away.

CHAPTER X.

THE GAME AT CHESS.

A FEW more words passed, then Margaret said:

"Miss Chase, let me present Mr. Hinchley to you."

The lady bowed slightly in return to the stranger's salutation, looked keenly from under her long eyelashes, and turned again toward Miss Waring, who, in spite of her assertions, was greatly terrified and shaken, as Sybil plainly detected through all her forced spirits.

"By the luckiest chance in the world, Hinchley rode up at the very moment Margaret fell," said Laurence.

"I was very fortunate in being so opportune in my arrival," replied the young man.

"We have not even asked how you happened to get here so unexpectedly," said Margaret.

"I saw Dr. Thorne in town this morning, and he told me that Uncle Gerald had been quite ill again, so I took the late train up—luckily, Smith, at the depot, had a horse to lend me."

"Uncle Gerald is better," Margaret said.

"I am glad to hear it; those attacks get so much worse that I was quite alarmed."

"He seems very much shaken by this one," Laurence said, "but the doctor thinks he will soon get better; the warm weather is coming on, and that always agrees with him, you know."

"You will stay a week or so, Ralph?" Margaret said.

"As long as I can; it depends on my news from town."

"Miss Waring looks pale," interrupted Sybil, whose head was still averted from Hinchley.

"Are you really hurt, Margaret?" asked Hinchley.

"Not in the least," she replied; but her voice trembled a little.

"She is frightened, of course," said Sybil; "who could help it? I am sure she will not ride again this season."

"I think she is cured of such fears," returned Laurence.

"Oh yes," answered Margaret, hastily. "But let us ride home; it is getting late, and uncle will want to see Ralph before going to bed."

The three rode through the gates, which Miss Chase had left open, while that lady followed at a little distance.

"We are leaving her all alone," said Margaret, in a low voice, to Laurence.

"That is true; and it scarcely looks civil," he replied. "Ride on to the house, Margaret, with Hinchley, and I will walk with her."

"Very well," Margaret said, unable longer to conceal her nervousness, and not sorry that she could have an opportunity to recover herself before again enduring her betrothed husband's somewhat impatient scrutiny.

The pair rode on; Mr. Laurence dismounted from his horse, and stood in the avenue as Miss Chase approached.

"You look in this moonlight pale and melancholy as a knight-errant," she said, playfully.

"I am waiting for you," he replied.

"Indeed, there was no necessity."

"Does that mean you prefer to walk alone?"

"I am not much given to incivility, you know; I did not wish to detain you from your friends."

"Oh, they will take care of each other," he replied. "I wonder you don't say something about him—you are less susceptible than most young ladies. Hinchley is a great favorite."

"Please do not slander my sex, Mr. Laurence, or we shall quarrel at once."

"And you will conquer me, as you always do at chess. But at all events, you can not be offended at my saying that you are different from youthful females in general; almost any other would have asked twenty questions in a breath about the stranger."

"But Mr. Hinchley is hardly a stranger," she replied.

"Oh, that is true; but I believe you have never met him before."

"No, but I have heard Miss Waring talk so much of her favorite cousin, and Mr. Waring is always sounding his praises."

"He is almost like a brother to Margaret; I wonder you never saw him when you were here before."

"He was in Europe," replied Sybil, indifferently.

"I am sorry Margaret received that fright."

"I wish she had a little of your courage."

"I have been accustomed to ride from childhood—"

"And are the best horsewoman I ever saw."

"I ought to deny it, but shall not. At all events, I am not in the least afraid of Robin Hood nor of Sir Charles here;" as Sybil spoke, she offered the horse one of the roses she held in her hand. "That is a treat which the baronet appreciates," she added.

"He isn't often fed with roses."

"What a waste of sentiment," he replied, "to feed a horse on what any man would covet."

"He is grateful for them, at all events."

"Perhaps his master would be more grateful still; you have not tried him."

She laughed, selected a beautiful bud from the bunch, and looked at it for a moment. When he reached forth his hand, she drew back the flower with a gesture too pretty to be called coquetry.

"No; Sir Charles shall have that, and Miss Waring will like the rest."

He was a little annoyed; any man would have been, treated with this seeming indifference, whether he cared for the person or not.

"You are determined never to be friends with me," he said.

"On the contrary, I have to thank you and everybody here for a great deal of kindness."

"I am sure both Margaret and Mr. Waring feel much obliged to you; her health is so delicate, that the house would have been in hopeless disorder except for your attention, and the old gentleman considers you perfection."

"It is very pleasant to be appreciated," she answered, gayly. "At least, you ought to thank me; I kept Miss Waring from dying of regret during your absence."

"Margaret would never die from any such feeling," he replied, impatiently.

"I think where she loves, all her feelings are centered."

"Ah, Miss Chase, romance fades rapidly during a long engagement."

"So all engaged people tell me," she answered; "I shall take warning from this experience of others. But we must walk faster; Miss Waring will think us lost, unless Mr. Hinchley is charming enough to make her forget our absence."

"I think Margaret does not care much for the Society of gentlemen."

"Not in general, I believe."

"Nor in any particular case, I should hope," he said, quickly. "We quarrel a great deal, as you know, Miss Chase, but I have never thought coquetry among her faults."

"Nor I."

"Hinchley is greatly admired by young ladies,"

pursued Laurence; "but he seems to care very little about it."

"He is very handsome—"

"Why, you hardly looked at him."

"I was quoting Miss Waring—incorrectly, however."

"What did she say?"

"That he had a very noble face—something above mere beauty."

"She was quite eloquent," he said, dryly.

"Oh, no; but we were alone, and could not be silent."

"And so you talked of Ralph Hinchley?"

"Naturally enough, as he is her nearest relative. Are you blaming Miss Waring or me?"

"Neither, I assure you."

"Mr. Hinchley is dependent upon his profession, I believe?"

"Yes; I fancy he is not rich at all."

"There I can sympathize with him."

"Have you come to that?"

"Don't make me appear silly! If Margaret were here, I should say something that you might construe into a compliment."

"You have never paid me one—"

"I never do compliment people whom I respect; that may account for it."

"But what would you have said?"

"That the men I have been in the habit of meeting since I came here have made me difficult to please, so that quite young gentlemen seldom strike me favorably."

"Oh, that is flattery—"

"It would have been to Miss Waring."

"How so?"

"A compliment to her taste in selecting you as a husband."

By that time they had reached the veranda, and as she spoke the last words, Miss Chase ran up the steps, humming a song, and entered the hall just as Margaret descended the stairs, after having exchanged her habit for a dress more suitable to the house.

"Are you better?" Sybil asked.

"Yes; but I was terribly frightened, though I would not have Mr. Laurence know it for the world—my timidity annoys him so much."

"He is coming," whispered Miss Chase.

"Please come and make the tea," said Margaret; "my hands shake yet."

Mr. Laurence joined them in the hall.

"Well, you are not frightened, now it is all over?" he asked.

"No, not much; anyway, I am unhurt."

Miss Chase threw back the hood of her cloak, and accompanied them into the library; a glance at the hall-glass had convinced her that her appearance was picturesque. She stood a second in the door, took off the pretty blue mantle and laid it on the sofa; the breeze had given her a color, and her hair an added wave, particularly becoming.

Margaret ensconced herself in an easy-chair near the fire, which had been kindled to give an appearance of comfort to the room, although the night was too warm to render it necessary. Miss Chase seated herself by the tray, while Laurence turned to Margaret:

"Where is Mr. Hinchley?"

"Gone up to see uncle; he will be down in a moment."

The gentleman entered as she spoke. Sybil Chase was occupied, and did not look up. He gave her a quick glance, started, and a perplexed look passed over his face as if he fancied that he had seen her before, and was trying to remember where; then it faded, and he sat down near his cousin.

"Uncle has gone to bed," he said; "he looks very ill to-night."

"But he is better, I am sure he is," she replied, anxiously.

"I hope so," he answered; and, remarking her

attention, changed the subject at once. "Have you been trouting, Laurence?" he asked. "I remember your old passion."

"I was out the other day, but we will go again—an expedition for the ladies. Are you fond of trout-fishing, Miss Chase?"

"Yes; I must plead guilty to the weakness and cruelty."

"And you, Margaret?"

"I shall like to go; but I never have any success."

"And you think it wicked, I believe?" he replied, carelessly, and with a little irony, such as was often apparent in the conversations between the two lovers.

"No matter what I think," she replied, smiling pleasantly enough, although displeased at his manner; "I will not force my private convictions upon any of you."

"But you will have a cup of tea?" said Miss Chase.

Mr. Hinchley went to the table, and taking the cup from Sybil, carried it to his cousin.

"Hester has treated us to marmalade," said Laurence, laughing, as he approached the table.

"Which I am morally certain you will spill on the carpet—won't he, Miss Waring?"

"Of course; do keep him at the table, for the sake of the new carpet which we both admire so much."

"Then the whole dish of marmalade will be in danger," said Laurence.

"Miss Chase will wisely move it," added Hinchley.

"I think I must," added Sybil, "but there, you shall have a very large spoonful; it is better than roses."

She put the conserve upon his plate, took up her flowers that lay on the table, and added:

"I picked these for you, Miss Waring; they are from your favorite bush."

She gave them to Hinchley to carry to Margaret; Mr. Laurence ate his marmalade and looked a little vexed.

"They are beautiful roses," Hinchley said.

"Very," Margaret replied, putting them carelessly in her hair; "you shall have a bud to reward you for not having purloined the whole bunch."

She selected a half-open rose and handed it to him. Miss Chase smiled imperceptibly.

"May I have a cup of tea, Miss Chase?" asked Laurence, adding, as he bent toward her: "You were over fastidious, you see."

Not a word answered Sybil—just the slightest elevation of her eyebrows, the least possible expression of surprise about her mouth; yet, by that mere nothing, she contrived to show that she disapproved of the innocent and thoughtless act, but meant to keep any such feeling to herself.

The evening passed pleasantly enough. Mr. Laurence forgot his momentary vexation, the cause of which he could scarcely have told. He challenged Miss Chase to a game of chess, and she consented.

While the two played, Margaret and Mr. Hinchley sat by the fire, and talked of their uncle, the pleasures of old times, new books and the thousand other trifles, about which people who have no deep feelings in common converse together.

Miss Chase lost the game because she had made up her mind to be defeated; but the next she won. Still, during the whole evening her attention was not sufficiently fixed upon either board or moves to prevent her hearing and seeing every thing that passed around her.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FEMALE IAGO.

THE engagement between Laurence and Margaret Waring had been a family affair, brought about principally by the romance of a maiden aunt, with whom the young man was a favorite.

Edward had been under this relative's charge after the death of his parents, which occurred during his childhood, and she had petted and spoiled the boy as only a spinster could have done.

Mr. Waring, the uncle of Margaret, was one of

Miss Laurence's nearest neighbors, and the girl had been almost as great a favorite with the spinster as her own nephew. Indeed, it was said that Mabel Laurence had loved Margaret's father in her youthful days; but how that might be nobody really knew, for the old maid wisely kept her own secrets, as women, after all, are apt to do when there is nothing to gratify the vanity in them.

But it happened that the boy and girl were reared almost like brother and sister, and the two houses were almost equally homes to both. Mr. Waring was a confirmed invalid, whose life seemed to hang upon a thread, and Miss Laurence had always been in yearly expectation that the girl would soon come entirely under her charge.

People are generally mistaken in such calculations, and Miss Laurence was no exception; for when Margaret Waring was sixteen, the spinster died in her arms after a short but violent illness.

Edward, then a youth of twenty, was traveling in Europe, and by one of the old lady's last commands was to remain there at least a year longer. When the will was opened, it was found to contain a singular clause—one common enough in novels, and as the spinster had been an insatiable devourer of light literature, it is quite probable that she derived from thence the idea which was expressed in her testament.

Her fortune, which was a very large one, was divided equally between her nephew and Margaret Waring, on condition that they became husband and wife; otherwise, no provision was made for Margaret, a small annuity was left Laurence, and the rest of the property was to be employed in founding a hospital for old maids.

Now, I am not drawing upon my imagination for these details; this was the will as it was actually written. Miss Laurence was convinced that Margaret and her nephew had loved each other from childhood, so that she believed herself acting for their happiness; besides, she had English blood in her veins, and could not resist the true British desire to display her own power and authority, even after death.

The year passed. Edward Laurence returned home when Margaret was seventeen; the engagement had been regarded as a settled thing. The young people loved each other—there could be no doubt of that; but, after a time, the very certainty that their destinies had been settled for them in a fashion so compulsory, led to all manner of disagreements and quarrels.

Two years before the commencement of this record, Mr. Waring had been obliged to go South for his health, and it was necessary to provide a companion for Margaret during his absence. Some friend had introduced Sybil Chase, and she spent the winter in the family. From the time of her entrance into that house could be dated the first real unhappiness of the young pair.

Sybil had been brought up by a bad, unprincipled mother, educated far beyond what the woman's means seemed to permit, and for what end only her own erratic mind ever knew. Soon after she left school, the young girl quarreled with her mother, and for several years earned her own living as best she might. We will not inquire too closely into the records of that Bohemian life. It is sufficient for our story that she at length took up her residence with Margaret Waring, just as that young lady's engagement to young Laurence became known.

How it came about, Margaret could never have told; but before she had been many weeks in the house, Sybil Chase had made herself of the utmost importance there. She quietly relieved Margaret of every duty; she read to her, she talked with her—not at all with the manner of a dependent, which, in a certain sense, she was not, but as an equal and friend.

When Margaret had time to think, she felt a certain unaccountable repugnance to Sybil; yet in her society there was a charm which few people could have resisted. Against her better judgment, contrary to her principles and her common sense, Mar-

garet acquired a habit of talking freely with her. Sybil knew all the disagreements and troubles which disturbed the house, understood perfectly Margaret's character, and had studied Laurence himself with still more subtle criticism.

With all the wild fervor of her passionate youth, Sybil Chase became fatally attached to young Laurence; yet so firm was her self-command, so deep her powers of duplicity, that she gave no sign of the passion that consumed her. In the depths of her soul she was resolved that the man she loved should never fulfill his engagement; but just as she was beginning to weave her meshes around him, Mr. Waring returned home, broke up his establishment, and proceeded with his daughter on a long tour through the West Indies and Southern States.

Once more this singular young creature was thrown back upon her mother's support. An imperfect reconciliation took place between them, and she sunk gradually into her old life, which became more and more irksome from contact with persons so unlike those with whom she had been recently associated.

While her mind was in this restless state, she heard that young Laurence had followed his betrothed to Cuba, in which place the marriage had taken place. The news stung her to madness. In the first paroxysm of wounded affection and mortified pride, she fell in with Philip Yates, married him privately, and went away.

In two years she came back to her mother again, but to be the protector, not the dependent, now. She had money, which was shared generously with the old woman; but, in a short time, this constant companionship with an unrefined and evil-minded woman became unendurable. Sybil was in no state of mind to accept the dull life presented in this companionship. She had rested long enough, and now felt that keen hunger for excitement which follows prolonged inaction.

While this fever was strong upon her, she met Laurence in the street. Little and knowing the passion that drove the blood from her cheek, or that they had met before in far distant mountains of the Golden State, he upbraided her kindly for keeping aloof from her old friends, spoke respectfully of Mr. Waring's still infirm health, and of Margaret's protracted feebleness.

She choked down the passion that swelled in her throat, and inquired kindly if his wife had been seriously ill.

Laurence laughed. "Wife?" he answered, coloring a little. "Oh, Maggie and I are not married yet. The old gentleman says that we are young enough to wait."

Sybil's heart bounded in her bosom. Her eyes flashed—she could not altogether conceal the triumph of her joy.

"Are you never coming to see Margaret?" he said.

"Margaret—Margaret Waring? Oh yes."

"The old gentleman is seriously ill again. You ought to come. He often says no one ever proved so good a nurse as you."

"The good old man. I will go to him."

She went to Waring's house the next day, and stayed there. Mr. Waring was ill and selfish; he would not let her go away. She yielded with apparent reluctance, and quietly commenced her work. By her soft words, broken sentences, and subtle looks, Margaret and Laurence had become almost completely estranged, and nothing but the persuasions of mutual friends prevented their breaking the engagement which bound them. Sybil looked on and waited, fostered their difficulties, and watched for the moment which should secure the victory to her love.

She was greatly aided by the manner in which their betrothal had been brought about, the consequences of which had been exactly those a wise person would have anticipated. The romance of an involuntary engagement wore rapidly away. Both were pained, and each blamed the other for things

which were at once the fault and the misfortune of a forced position.

Maggie was proud and exacting, morbidly sensitive, and her high spirit revolting; at the idea of submission, often prevented her yielding to her lover's wishes when she knew herself to be in the wrong. These feelings rendered her fearful of betraying her fondness, and in numberless ways brought pain to her own heart and that of the man who loved her.

On the other hand, Edward was as passionate and imperious as she could possibly be; his temper was violent, and when that was roused, he gave way to every reckless word that anger could suggest, forgetting them entirely when his temper cooled. Margaret could not forget; she remembered them all, treasured up every cruel word, every scornful sneer, like poisoned arrows wherewith to pierce her heart anew in her lonely hours.

The young girl grew cold and unsympathetic, careless of exciting his rage, but often taking refuge in an icy impassibility, which excited him more than any recrimination would have done. A stubborn, obstinate will developed itself in her character, against which the waves of her lover's passions beat in vain; but that very resolution separated them still further.

All this had been the growth of Sybil's subtle influence. For the first period of their engagement they had been very happy. What caused their first quarrel, neither could have told; the source was probably as slight as it usually is in such cases; the effect had been fraught with many evil influences, such as are apt to follow similar misunderstandings.

They had reached a point where each looked back on the past with angry, defiant feelings. It was like gazing across a troubled sea upon a fair landscape—to glance from the present back into the beautiful past.

Had they been older and wiser, both parties might have done much toward changing the state of things. A single honest effort would have swept aside the heavy clouds which loomed darkly in the future. But neither of them understood this, or would have made any effort of the kind had it been pointed out. So they quarreled openly and avowedly, and the fact that in each heart lay a great well-spring of affection, made their quarrels more bitter and implacable.

Margaret was made to believe that her lover had ceased to care for her, and wished to continue his engagement only that he might tyrannize and command. Her health had become more delicate than ever, the bloom of early girlhood was fading, and although still very lovely, she had learned to think her beauty gone, and decided that with it all affection had departed from the heart of her betrothed. Those feelings and suspicions made her colder and more unyielding, until Edward wondered he could ever have thought her winning or gentle. He was irritated by the indifference with which she treated every attempt at a reconciliation, and the violence of his temper increased in proportion to the pain of his position.

They suffered greatly, those poor, blind creatures! Daily the cloud which had descended upon their home grew blacker and swept them still further apart. Indeed, they had reached that point where it would need but a little thing to bring the tempest down in its wild fury—the terrible tempest which should wrench from them all hope of happiness or peace, which must desolate their after lives, and leave them stranded upon a desert with no hope left, no memory unstained, no love in the future.

The marriage of this young couple had been deferred from various causes, the principal ones being Mr. Waring's frequent illnesses and the delicate state in which Margaret's health had fallen during the past year.

Laurence almost made his home at the house, and as he had no profession or settled business, he found more time than was requisite for making himself miserable, and gave way to all manner of repinings.

During her former residence at Mr. Waring's house, it had chanced that Hinchley had never seen Sybil Chase, and her very existence was almost unknown to him, before that agitated introduction on the hillside. Thus she had no fears of a recognition, or that her face would bring back to him that fearful night in the valley ranch. With her heart thus at rest, she went down-stairs on the morning after his arrival, according to her usual habit since the pleasant June weather had come in. No members of the family were stirring except the servants, for Margaret was inclined to gratify the indolence arising from ill-health, and the family breakfast-hour was always a late one.

With her cheeks fresh as the roses, Miss Chase descended the stairs, went forth to the garden, and proceeded into the rose thickets, looking beautiful and bright as the dewy scene that surrounded her. Indeed, as she stood there in her gipsy bonnet and muslin dress, a prettier picture could not well be imagined.

She had a basket on her arm, a pair of scissors in her hand, and daintily snipped off the stems of such blossoms as pleased her; she pressed the gathered roses to her red lips till they were wet with dew, took the fresh scent of each in turn, and dropped one after another into her basket. While pursuing her task, she sung snatches of pleasant tunes in a clear soprano voice that floated richly on the air.

Occasionally, in the midst of her employment, Miss Chase glanced toward the upper windows or the hall-door. The first person who appeared was Mr. Laurence. He saw Sybil and walked toward her. Miss Chase was greatly occupied just then, and gave no attention to his approach.

"Good-morning," he said; "are you talking so sweetly with those roses that you can neither see nor hear?"

"I am trying to steal their color," she replied, with an honest sort of frankness that was very captivating. "Look at this bud, Mr. Laurence; did you ever see any thing more beautiful?"

"Lovely, indeed; you perceive you were over fastidious about giving away your flowers last night. Margaret did not prize them as highly as you expected."

"What proof have you?"

"She gave one to Hinchley."

"Oh yes, so she did; but he is a relative, remember. I need not offer you flowers in your own garden. I am certain it was the merest thoughtlessness which made Margaret bestow the roses on your guest last night."

"Who ever supposed it was any thing else?"

"Oh, I thought—that is, from the way you spoke—"

"What did you think?"

"That you were not pleased, if I must say it."

"I thought very little about the matter. I have no fancy for setting up as a pale-faced Othello."

"Oh dear, I should hope not; there would be nobody but me to play Emilie, and I should certainly run away, instead of standing by poor Desdemona. But I have to beg your pardon for my absurd mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"For thinking you were displeased. I might have known you had more sense, but I have seen men who would have pouted for a week over a trifle of less consequence."

"Did you think it wrong?"

"Good heavens, no; but I am not a proper judge. I suppose every wife ought to be exceedingly careful; but then, is a woman to be deprived of every bit of sentiment or romance?"

"I don't think Margaret addicted to either. I should be sorry to believe it."

"And I too. But I must take my basket of flowers into the house; don't stand here fighting shadows, Mr. Laurence."

"I am not aware that I have been doing battle with any such unsubstantial thing," he answered.

Miss Chase turned toward the house; he followed,

but with a new train of thought awakened in his mind. He began to wonder if he really had been displeased at this trifle; certainly, he was not jealous, but he would permit no impropriety. Had there been any? The simple giving of a flower—she had done nothing more than that; and yet—well, he had not thought much of it at the time, but Miss Chase had in a measure convinced him that he was more impressed than he had believed. If Margaret was going to add coquetry to her numerous other faults, his life would be irksome enough!

He accompanied Sybil into the breakfast-room, helped her arrange the flowers, and in the process they fell into a pleasant conversation. It was a full half-hour before Hinchley or Margaret made their appearance. A great deal can be done in that length of time, especially when economized with as much wisdom as Sybil Chase was capable of employing.

CHAPTER XII.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

Soon after breakfast, Hinchley and Laurence rode over to a neighboring town upon some business for Mr. Waring, leaving the two ladies alone.

Miss Chase and Margaret still sat in the breakfast-room, the latter pretending to read the paper, from very weariness and disinclination to talk, while Sybil held some embroidery in her hand, and, under cover of that employment, watched her companion with keen scrutiny.

"I am seized with a fever," she said, suddenly.

Margaret looked up and smiled a little.

"What is the name of it?" she asked.

"One common enough to us poor, weak women—I want a new spring dress. If it were not for leaving you alone, I am half inclined to run into town and make a purchase."

"Do not let me detain you," returned Margaret, feeling so ill at ease with herself and every thing and person around her, that she was pleased with this prospect of solitude.

"I suppose the gentlemen will soon return."

"I am sure I do not know," she answered, indifferently.

"You will not feel lonely if I go?"

"Pray, do not think me so foolish."

"You know I like to sit with you, Miss Waring."

"But to-day, go to town and shop if the mania has taken possession of you. By the way, if you see any pretty pink organdy, you may purchase it for me, and leave it at Mrs. Forrest's to be made up. I remember now, a new dress is the very thing I want."

"I had better dress at once; let me see, the train starts at eleven. I shall be in town at two o'clock."

"George will drive you over to the depot; you have just time to dress and get there. You will be back to dinner?"

"Oh, yes; before, perhaps."

After a few careless words, Miss Chase went up to her room, and as she passed down-stairs ready to go, opened the door of the breakfast-room, where Margaret sat in the same dreary solitude.

"Have you any other commands?" she asked, pleasantly.

"None, thank you; what a fine day you will have."

"Oh, lovely; good-morning."

Margaret returned this farewell, and Miss Chase took her departure.

There the unhappy girl remained, and let the hours float on while she gave herself up to a thousand bitter reflections. The bright spring morning had no charm for Margaret, the merry carols of the birds upon the lawn had lost their sweetness to her

ear; she could only gaze upon the dark shadows of her life, and mark how, day by day, it drifted into deeper gloom. Her strength seemed to fail daily, and that of itself would have been sorrow enough for one of her age; but she had sterner troubles still.

How the promise of her girlhood had cheated her!

The affection which she had believed was to brighten all coming years, was rapidly fading from her life.

Let it go! She would make no effort to recover either the hopes or the love that she had lost. Laurence might take his own course; she would not try to recall his wandering fancies. She believed that her heart was strong enough to despise his love if again offered. There Margaret made the mistake which all young persons fall into when the proud, untried heart falls into its first love-sorrow.

While Margaret indulged in that mournful reverie, Sybil Chase was on her way to the city, smiling and pleasant, affable to every one that came in her way; even the servant, who drove her over to the station, thought to himself what a different lady she was from his silent, haughty mistress; and the farmers who rented portions of Mr. Waring's estate, and among whom she had made herself a very popular person, smiled pleasantly as she rode by.

Cheerful and handsome she looked, sitting in the train, and being whirled rapidly along the pretty route on her way to town. She reached the city even earlier than she anticipated, and went about her errands at once, with her accustomed straightforwardness. Nothing was forgotten. Margaret's indifferent message was punctually fulfilled, and in a manner which must have satisfied a much more difficult person than Margaret.

When she had completed her purchases, Miss Chase took her way to a retired and somewhat unpleasant part of the town. She had her veil drawn, and hurried along as if anxious not to be observed by any chance acquaintance.

She stopped before a decent looking tenement-house, ascended the steps, glanced about with her habitual caution, to see that no one was watching her, and entered the hall. She mounted the weary staircase, which appeared interminable; passed through several dark entries, and at length knocked at one of the doors which opened into a passage nearest the roof.

Twice she knocked, the second time imperatively and with impatience; then a querulous voice called out:

"Come in, can't you; the door isn't locked."

So Miss Chase turned the knob, opened the door, and entered a small, plainly furnished room, yet bearing no evidence of the extreme poverty which often makes the tenement-house so dreary.

A woman was seated near the little window, in a stiff-backed chair, dividing her attention between a half-finished stocking and a number of some weekly newspaper of the cheapest class, full of wonderful cuts and more wonderful stories.

She looked up quickly as Miss Chase entered, gave out an evil, wicked glance, which appeared natural to her, although the general appearance of her face was quiet and commonplace enough.

"So you've come," was her only salutation.

"Yes; did you expect me?"

"I expected you three days ago."

"I was constantly occupied; it was impossible for me to get away until now."

"You needn't lie," returned the woman, curtly.

"I won't," said Sybil, serene as ever.

She seated herself opposite the female and untied her bonnet-strings, looking placid and at home, as she invariably was in all places and under all circumstances.

The woman glanced keenly at her, and a strange sort of affectionate look crept over her face.

"You're brooding mischief," she pronounced suddenly and emphatically, as if she would permit no contradiction.

"What makes you think so?" Sybil asked.

"Cause you grow good looking; when you get that bright contented look, I always know there's something in the wind."

"You are very wise," replied Sybil, evincing no displeasure at the accusation, which would have struck many persons unpleasantly.

"Yes; I ain't blind; I've generally kept my eyes open going through this world."

"That is the only way, if one does not wish to run against the wall."

"As you did once," retorted the woman, with a chuckle; "you know you did that, cute as you think yourself."

"I have not forgotten it," replied Sybil, coolly; "the hurt taught me to keep my eyes open too."

"Learned you to look before you leap," said the woman. "Well, I guess you owe a good deal to my lessons."

Sybil did not answer, but shrugged her shoulders slightly, and gazed out of the window, occupied with her own reflections.

"Now don't act as if I was a log of wood," said the woman fretfully; "there's nothing makes me so mad."

"I was waiting to hear what you would say next."

"What did you come for?"

"To see you, of course."

"Well, look at me; I don't charge anything for the sight! I used to be worth the trouble of turning round to see, I did; I was better looking than you are or ever will be—but that's all over. Just say what you're after now."

"I came because I thought you wanted something."

"You should have brought me money three days ago; I hate to be behindhand with my rent."

"Surely you ought to have had enough for that; you know how little money I possess."

"Fiddle-de-dee! Ask that Laurence for some."

"I can not do that; you must see how impossible it is."

"There's nothing impossible where money is concerned. But no matter, take your own way."

"It is growing clear now," said Sybil.

"Time it did; you've made mistakes enough."

Sybil did not appear desirous of pursuing the conversation. She took out her purse, counted several gold pieces into her palm, while the woman watched her with covetous eyes.

"That will serve you until I come again," she said, extending her hand.

The woman clutched the money eagerly, counted it twice to be certain there was no mistake, then rose from her seat and went to an old bureau in a corner of the room. After fumbling in her pocket for a while, and pulling out a heterogeneous mass of things, a dingy red silk handkerchief among the rest, she produced a small key, unlocked one of the drawers, and put the gold carefully away in a buckskin bag; then she locked the bureau again and returned to her seat.

"That is safe," she said, more complacently; the touch of the money had evidently mollified her feelings. "Now, let's talk about something else—about your plans, say."

"I can not answer your questions; every thing is dark yet—a few months will decide."

"Don't you get careless, you know."

"There is no fear; I am not a child."

"No; and you've learned by the hardest."

"Don't ever speak of the past; I can bury it now—I have buried it."

"Wal, it's a dead friend I guess you ain't sorry to be rid of."

Sybil looked white; her eyes had a strained, unnatural expression, and her hands clenched together with the old force and tightness.

"It is all over—all over."

"Nothing to be afraid of, I s'pose, unless you believe in ghosts or such things."

Sybil's face changed; she dropped her hands; the color came back to her cheek—she laughed outright, a defiant mocking sound.

"Not at all; no ghost will trouble me—not even his."

"Tell me a little how things go on."

The woman drew closer to her visitor, and inclined her head to listen attentively. Sybil talked for many moments in a voice sunk almost to a whisper, as if dropping hints to which she dared not give utterance aloud.

Her companion noted every word and movement, with a bad, malignant expression crept over her face, till it seemed impossible that it should ever have looked comely or pleasant. Sometimes she nodded her head approvingly; once she laughed outright. Sybil put up her hand to check the merriment, which would have grated harshly upon a less well-attuned ear than hers.

"I must go now," Miss Chase said, at last; "I shall not get back by dinner-time as it is."

"I ought to be there," the woman exclaimed; "there is so much I could do."

"I know that, if you would only manage to control your temper."

"Never you fear me; I can do that easy enough when there is any thing to be gained by it."

"One never knows what may happen. Always keep yourself in readiness to obey my summons."

"I could start at any moment."

"We shall be obliged to wait; an opportunity may arise by which I could introduce you to the house."

"Make the opportunity; a smart woman can always do that."

"Ah! you have not my prudence."

"I guess you learned it lately; but we won't quarrel. If you want me, I will come."

"You would not care in what way; you would not mind the occupation?"

"Lord bless you, no; I'm good at any thing—general housework, cooking; it's all fish that comes to my basket."

"Good-by, now," said Sybil; "I shall miss the train if I stop another moment."

The woman followed her to the door, whispered some added parting advice, and watched her disappear down the stairs. Then she returned to the room and set about preparing herself a cup of tea, chuckling occasionally in a sharp way, like a meditative macaw, and looking altogether so unpleasant that a timid person would have been reluctant to remain alone in the chamber with her.

As Miss Chase predicted, dinner was over when she reached Mr. Waring's residence. She quietly disposed of her own repast which the housekeeper had condescended to set aside for her, and then, after changing her dress, went down into the library.

Mr. Laurence was sitting there alone, looking sullen and discontented enough; but he brightened somewhat when she entered, and greeted her cheerfully.

"I am glad you have come; I began to think I should have to spend the evening by myself, as Hinchley is busy with his uncle."

"Where is Miss Waring?" Sybil asked.

"In her own room, pouting or crying, according to the stage her ill-humor has reached."

Sybil sighed and shook her head.

"Are you blaming me?" he asked. "It was not my fault that we quarreled, but Margaret would provoke a saint! I could not tell to save my life, what the disturbance began about. I think I said one could not breathe in this room for the flowers; with that she worked herself into a violent rage, as if I had committed some unpardonable enormity."

"You should be patient," said Miss Chase.

"I know my temper is bad, but she seems to do every thing in her power to excite it. Why should you always blame me?"

"Am I blaming you?" she asked, softly. "It is not my place to express any opinion upon your differences with Miss Waring."

"I don't see why; both Margaret and myself regard you as a friend. I know she tells you all her troubles freely enough; why should you refuse to listen to my part of the story?"

"I do not refuse," she answered, sighing heavily; "but it pains me to know that you disagree so terribly."

"Disagree is a mild word; I admire your politeness; you know we quarrel like two hawks in a cage."

Miss Chase sighed again. "This deep breath

pressed as much sympathy as words could have done, and was far safer just there.

"The truth is," exclaimed Laurence, suddenly, "Margaret does not love me; there is the foundation of our troubles."

"Are you not judging hastily?"

"No; I have felt it for a long time; I am certain of it now. Tell me: do you believe any woman who loved a man would act as she does? Do you consider that she conducts herself as an engaged person should?"

"You must not ask me such questions; it would be wrong in me to answer."

"At least you can say if you think she loves me?"

Miss Chase hesitated.

"Speak the truth," said he, violently.

"No," returned Sybil, in a low whisper.

"Every one sees it," continued Laurence; "I knew you did. She is hard-hearted and ungrateful."

"Do not be harsh—"

"How can I help it," he interrupted; "she has wrecked my life—turned it into a curse. I have no hope—not a friend."

A tear fell from Sybil's downcast lashes, and rolled slowly down her cheek; she stole one glance, full of beautiful sympathy toward him—that was all.

"I believe you pity me," he said; "of late I have begun to hope it. You will be my friend; say, will you not try to help me?"

"So far as it is in my power, heaven knows I will. But I am a woman; I must be so cautious. Indeed, I would not incur Margaret's displeasure or that of Mr. Waring for the world."

"She would hate any one who feels kindly toward me!" He broke off abruptly, and gave himself up to a gloomy train of thoughts which took him far away from his companion; it did not suit Sybil to have it continue.

"You have had no tea," she said; "shall I order it brought up?"

"If you will stay and take it with me."

"First, let me inquire if Miss Waring will come down."

"Leave her where she is; I have had contention enough."

But Miss Chase kept her worldly wisdom in view. She went up stairs and found Margaret lying on the bed, but the unhappy girl could not be induced to rise.

"I don't wish any tea," she said; "I am going to sleep."

"Then I will have mine in my room."

"Please go down," said Margaret; "some of those tiresome people from the village will be certain to call, and if you are not ready to receive them, I shall be dragged out. I sha'n't take the trouble for Ralph or Mr. Laurence."

Willing to oblige, Miss Chase consented, and returned to the angry lover, only to exasperate his discontent.

No one did call that evening. Hinchley did not appear, and the two spent it in sad, earnest conversation. Edward Laurence retired to his room more than ever offended with Margaret, and convinced that Sybil Chase was the only person in the world who understood or pitied him—a high-minded, clear-sighted woman, whom he respected, and whose friendship appeared better worth having than the deepest love of ordinary women. Sybil sat pondering over the fire. In all the mischief which she had wrought, there was no possibility of tracing her influence; she had told no bungling falsehoods to be covered up or explained away; had committed no little feminine indiscretions at which the mistress of a household could cavil. Indeed, nothing could be more quiet and respectable than her whole conduct. She was very kind and useful in every respect. She made the house far more comfortable than it had ever been before, and was always ready to mediate in a quiet way between the lovers in their quarrels, regretting, in a Christian manner, her inability to

check them altogether; but with all her precautions, she had a difficult part to act, and it caused her much anxiety.

CHAPTER XIII.

HIGHCLIFF.

Of course that last quarrel between Laurence and Margaret was put aside after a time, as so many previous difficulties had been; but it left a more hurtful impression upon the minds of both than any former disagreement had ever been able to produce.

A party of guests, invited several months before, were staying at the house for a week, and in the general gaiety, both Laurence and Margaret almost forgot their troubles. There was nothing approaching confidence between them; they were civil and polite, but avoided explanations. In the haughty sensitiveness of young hearts, neither party was in a mood for taking the first step toward a reconciliation.

Parties and expeditions of all sorts were planned and carried out, into which Margaret entered with a feverish excitement which increased her lover's anger; he could not understand that her gaiety was a vexed foam, rising and frothing over the deep wretchedness within.

Ralph Hinchley was still at the house, and his quick perceptions made him understand, more clearly than any one else, the state of feeling between the unhappy pair.

He was an honorable, high-principled man, and not for the world would he have been guilty of an act which could produce new discord with those already divided hearts. But he pitied Laurence, and his sympathy for Margaret made him unusually kind and gentle. But Miss Chase watched every movement or word with her lynx-eyes, and turned each into the shape that best suited her purpose.

Laurence made Sybil his confidante now with the most perfect freedom; he told her all his suspicions, his unhappiness and fears; she gave him back the most touching sympathy, and such advice as proved satisfactory to his feelings in every respect.

Margaret was too much preoccupied to observe anything of this. Miss Chase was so wary and prudent that she would have averted the suspicions of a much more jealous person than her young hostess.

Edward Laurence, even in his anger and wretchedness, would have shrunk from any deliberate wrong to Margaret; but day by day, Sybil's influence over him increased—day by day her wiles produced their effect, and placed him more completely in her dangerous power.

They were conversing one morning in the breakfast-room before any one else was down—for Miss Chase persevered in her habit of early rising, and many long talks and rambles were taken with an unexpressed understanding of which no one in the house had the slightest idea.

They were talking of Margaret; she was often the subject of their conversations, while she lay in her darkened chamber, trying to forget her ills in broken slumber, which the dreary watches of the night had refused to give.

"How much Miss Waring enjoys society," Sybil said; "I am glad that these people happened to come just now—she was miserable before."

"Then you pity her for the misfortunes she has brought upon herself?"

"I pity her all the more on that account."

"I am not so charitable."

"At all events, she is gay and happy now," pursued Sybil.

"Yes; she can be pleasant to all the world except me," cried Laurence, bitterly.

"I will not permit you to be unjust," returned Miss Chase.

"You cannot deny that she is heartless and capricious; you admitted as much the other day."

"Did I? Then it was very wrong in me."

"Ah, you have no sympathy with my misery."

"Do not reproach me in this way; you know it is unjust."

"But did you not own you considered her cold and hard?"

"No; I admitted that she was capricious."

"But not heartless?"

"Not at all; I believe her capable of strong, even intense feeling."

"I have never witnessed any exhibition of it."

"I hope she will always remain in ignorance of it herself."

"Why?"

"Because it would place her in a very unhappy position. I pity any woman who is liable to make the discovery of such feelings when it is too late—when she can but sit down in passive submission to her destiny."

"Margaret is too impetuous for that."

"Nay, you cannot believe that she would fail to resist such feelings, when marriage made them a sin."

"I have never thought. I do not choose to contemplate the possibility of a thing like that."

"It is much wiser not."

The words grated unpleasantly on Laurence's ear; he could not tell why, but a vague suspicion in regard to Margaret woke in his mind—once roused, no power could thrust it aside.

"We go to Highcliff to-day, I believe," Sybil said, after a pause, too wise over to push a conversation one step too far.

"Yes; that was decided last night," he answered, moodily. "I wish these people were gone; I am tired of bustle and confusion. My own stay in the country should terminate at once, only the old gentleman won't hear of it."

Miss Chase expressed her entire participation in his weariness, and noticing that the hands of the clock had crept round to the hour at which people might be expected to make their appearance, she went out of the room and did not appear again until several of the party were gathered in the breakfast-room.

Soon after noon they started upon the expedition to Highcliff, a lofty mountain that towered over a river which flowed through the valley in which Mr. Waring's property lay, and was accessible to the summit by persons on horseback.

It was a large, merry party; Margaret was recklessly gay, conscious that her lover was watching her, and growing more excited and determined to appear careless and unconcerned on that account.

When they reached the top of the mountain, the horses were left in care of the servants, and the people wandered about at their pleasure, dividing into little groups and enjoying themselves as best suited their peculiar idiosyncracies.

Late in the afternoon, Sybil Chase, who had been talking first with one group then with another, looked about and missed Margaret and Hinchley; it seemed proper to her, in her wisdom, that their movements should be watched, and she flitted hither and yon among the trees in search of them.

Margaret had gone with Hinchley and a young girl, who had her own object in seeking that part of the woods, in search of a spring that broke out from the hollow of a charming little dell near by, filling the woods with its crystalline music. The hollow was celebrated not only for its spring of fresh water, but for the bird-songs that rung through it from morning to night, making the place, in more senses than one, a paradise.

The friends walked on, enjoying the shadows and sunshine that played through the branches. Margaret had, really, no thought of avoiding any of her party; but after Laurence left her side, she had little care about time or place.

As they came near the dell, Margaret's young friend changed her mind, as girls of sixteen sometimes will, very unaccountably. She had seen a certain young gentleman flitting through the distant shadows, and as his supposed presence there had

brought her toward the spring, a glimpse of his movements in another direction checked her desire for a drink of cold water on the instant. But she was seized with an overwhelming hunger for young wintergreen, and that always grew best on slopes which the sunshine visited occasionally—never in hollows.

She mentioned this craving wish with some hesitation, but Margaret only smiled and said:

"Nonsense, nonsense; time enough for that when we have seen the spring."

They moved a few paces and came in sight of the dell, a beautiful hollow shaded with hemlocks, dogwood and wild honeysuckles.

Fragments of rock lay in the bed of the hollow, through which a crystal brooklet, born at the spring, crept and murmured caressingly, sending up its tiny spray, and clothing its friends, the rocks, with the brightest moss. Water-cresses shone up through the waves, and speckled trout slept under the fern-leaves.

It was a delightful place, cool and heavenly; but the young lady of sixteen saw that figure moving away through the distance, and grew frantic from fear of snakes. Copperheads and red-adders, she protested, were always found in just such places—she saw one then, creeping around the foot of that hemlock. So with pretty expostulations and divers shrieks loud enough to arrest the young man in his covert, she darted off toward the open glades, where that shadowy figure was soon busy on his knees gathering young wintergreens for her benefit.

"Shall we go on?" Margaret asked, when the young lady had retreated.

"If you are not tired," Hinchley answered. "I should like to go down very much. The dell is the prettiest spot I ever saw, and the water delicious."

"Oh, yes, it is a lovely spot," Margaret said. "Some day I intend to make a sketch of it. Let us select the best view."

They went down the descent and stood by the spring, which rushed out from among the rocks with a pleasant, bell-like murmur, and cast its tiny shower of spray-bubbles over the violets that fringed it.

"How still it is," Margaret observed.

"Yes; it is refreshing to escape from all that chatter. How constantly people do talk."

"Yet if one is silent, it is to be considered stupid."

"But stupidity would be a relief sometimes."

Margaret did not answer; she was busy with her own thoughts. When Hinchley spoke again it was of other things. He had been shocked at finding so much changed at the homestead, for the old gentleman now saw no visitors and seldom left his room, and Ralph felt that he ought to make Margaret understand how little hope there was that she could much longer have her uncle's house as a place of protection.

Margaret wept bitterly; but when he attempted to speak of Laurence, or allude to her marriage, she only turned passionately away, with bitter, haughty words that made Ralph fear both for her and his friend.

While they stood talking by the spring, Sybil Chase moved softly through the underbrush and looked down at them. After a moment's silent watch, she went back toward the place where she had left Laurence conversing with a group of persons who had become tired of wandering among the firs.

She remained a little way off from the party, and very soon he took occasion to join her. They began to converse, and gradually walked down the hill. Sybil did not appear to be leading him to any particular spot, but was walking as absently along as himself. She paused on a rise of ground which commanded a view of the dell. Sybil watched Laurence, but stood with her face turned from the spring. He caught sight of the pair standing in the dell—gave a quick start, while the color shot up to his forehead.

"Are you ill?" Sybil asked, gently.

"Look down there," he replied, pointing to Mar-

garet and Hinchley, who were absorbed in conversation, Ralph holding his cousin's hand, while she wept unrestrainedly.

"It is Margaret," said Sybil.

"And Hinchley."

"They have come to see the spring."

"I perceive, Miss Chase," he spoke bitterly.

"Nonsense, Mr. Laurence—you are not jealous? He is her cousin."

"No—I am displeased."

"It means nothing at all."

"But it does not look well. I can see you think so."

"It may be a little imprudent, but you know Margaret is very impulsive. Shall we go down?"

"We will not disturb them."

"Don't look so stern, Mr. Laurence; you really frighten me."

"There is no cause for alarm. The moment Margaret convinces me that she is a flirt, I shall feel only contempt for her."

"I am sure she is not in fault," returned Sybil. "I never saw her encourage the slightest attention from any gentleman before."

"True—I had not thought of that."

He frowned, black and angry, bit his lip and reflected.

"You meant something then which I did not comprehend," said Miss Chase.

"I was reflecting. I never saw Margaret on such friendly terms with any man before. It makes me think the more seriously of this."

"Great heavens, Mr. Laurence, you cannot suspect her, Hinchley is her cousin. They have been dear friends from childhood."

"She is my betrothed wife. She has no right to make herself a subject of comment."

"Come away!" she exclaimed, quickly; "come away!"

She took his hand and drew him back into the path.

"It is nothing," she repeated several times. "I am convinced that you are angry without cause."

"I believe so," replied Laurence—"I must believe it! But Margaret had better take care. I have borne a great deal. She shall not, by her folly or her vanity, make me ridiculous, nor will I be made a dupe."

"Such words, Mr. Laurence!"

"I mean them! As for Hinchley, if he makes trouble between Margaret and me, I shall hold him guilty as if she were my wife."

Sybil sighed heavily.

"Of what are you thinking?" asked Laurence.

"I hardly know—I cannot tell."

"I see that you are troubled," he said, violently. "Sybil, you have called yourself my friend; answer me: do you believe that Hinchley loves Margaret?"

Sybil hesitated; her head was averted, as if she could not bear to meet his earnest gaze.

"I have ceased to believe that she cares greatly for me. Tell me if you think Hinchley is more to her than a cousin and friend."

"Do not ask me; mine are only vague suspicions. I cannot be the one to destroy your last hope of happiness."

"I am answered," he said, gloomily.

"No, no; I will not—I cannot answer! Look for yourself, Mr. Laurence. I may be wrong. I have very strict and, what people might think, singular ideas. Oh! don't mind what I have said."

"I will see for myself," he answered, recklessly. "Let me once be convinced, and I shall leave her forever. Oh, Sybil! you are my friend—the only one to whom I can turn for sympathy."

Sybil buried her face in her hands and burst into tears; but when he attempted to question her, she broke from him.

"Let me go!" she exclaimed. "I blush for my own weakness. Let me go, Edward Laurence!"

She hurried away, leaving him bewildered and troubled. For the first time he felt dimly that Sybil loved him, and the consciousness brought a

host of inexplicable feelings to his heart. She took so lovely in her distress—her gentleness in contrast with Margaret's violence and ill-temper, was so touching, that her image lingered in his imagination—the only ray of light in all the blackness which surrounded him.

As Hinchley and his cousin passed up the hill, they saw Sybil Chase conversing with a little group of friends.

"I have a horror of that woman," said Ralph.

"Yet she seems a quiet, sensible person," replied Margaret. "I have allowed myself to become prejudiced against her; but when I am in her society I forget it all."

Hinchley did not answer. The remembrance of that terrible night in California came back, as was always the case, when Sybil Chase came in sight. Her figure started up instead of the woman he had but half seen, and he turned from the thought with self-aborrence—it was wicked to indulge it even for an instant.

While they stood together, Laurence approached, pale and agitated, like a man under the excitement of wine.

"Edward!" Hinchley called out, cheerfully.

"Laurence, is it not almost time to go home?"

"I suppose you are at liberty to choose your own time," replied Laurence, insolently.

Margaret colored scarlet; an insult to her cousin seemed given to herself.

"What is the matter?" asked Ralph in surprise.

"Oh, pay no attention," interposed Margaret, before Laurence could reply. "It is only a slight specimen of Mr. Laurence's civility. He is not satisfied with being rude to me, but must extend his bad manners to my relatives."

"You are at liberty to put any construction you please upon my words or manner," returned Laurence. "I shall not account to either of you."

"To me it is a matter of perfect indifference," said Margaret, haughtily.

Ralph looked from one to the other in pain and astonishment, at a loss what to say or do.

"Now don't quarrel like children," he exclaimed, trying to laugh. "Come, shake hands and be friends."

"Miss Waring's conduct proves how sincerely she desires to be friends," answered Laurence, with a harsh laugh.

"I do not wish it," she exclaimed, greatly irritated by his manner.

"Margaret! Margaret!" pleaded Ralph.

"Oh, don't check her," sneered Laurence.

"He can not," returned Margaret. "I am weary of this rudeness—weariness of you."

"Say and do what you please; I will leave you in more agreeable society," said Laurence, hurrying away.

Hinchley tried to expostulate with her, but words were thrown away. During the ride home, and the whole evening, Margaret and Laurence did not speak. Ralph kept near her, anxious to soothe her anger, while Laurence and Sybil Chase watched every movement and look.

Thus, with her proud spirit in arms, and her heart aching with wounded tenderness, the poor girl rushed into the snare so insidiously laid beneath her feet.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE JAIL.

In one of the interior towns of California stands a jail, by no means striking in appearance, or remarkable for its solidity or strength, yet possessing the terrible fascination which any place connected with tragic deeds fastens on the mind.

Within that prison many notable criminals had been confined; murders had been committed there by hardened men, daring even their execution for liberty; many a reckless criminal had gone from thence to the gallows; even youths, with the fresh tints of boyhood on their cheeks, had gone out from those walls to a violent death, incited to evil doing

and crime by the very lawlessness and sin about them.

In one of the cells upon the upper floor a single occupant was seated, crouched down upon a bench, and his eyes moodily fixed upon the small grated window which looked out upon a sort of paved court around which the jail was built.

The prisoner might have been a man of thirty-five, but in that dim light, with his sunken head and face, pale from inactivity and confinement, it was difficult to judge accurately of his age.

The countenance was harsh and unpleasant, but the expression was rather that of restless passion than revealing any stern, sinister determination. His frame was large and muscular, the veins were knotted and swollen upon his pale hands, and it was indeed pitiable to see so much physical strength wasting in the gloom of a prison.

Sometimes his lips moved; the restless flashing of his eyes betrayed the brooding thought within his mind. At last he rose suddenly, took the bench upon which he had been sitting and lifted it, as if anxious to test his strength. He held it extended upon the fingers of his right hand, in a manner which required no inconsiderable force. Then he set it down upon the floor, abruptly as he had raised it and laughed a low, smothered laugh.

"Not quite a baby yet," he muttered—"not quite! I can do it, and I will. I have got out of worse scrapes than this—fudge, what's this place compared to Australia?"

A low imprecation finished the sentence, then he resumed his seat, and began his meditations anew. But quiet seemed impossible to him in the mood into which he had worked himself.

He rose again, carried the bench to the window, and, standing upon it, managed to keep high enough to grasp the gratings. There he suspended himself, with his whole weight resting upon his hands, and looked out. When he had finished his survey, he loosed his hold and dropped lightly upon the bench.

"It's all right," he whispered, to himself. "I know the place. It can be done, and I am the man to do it."

It was then somewhat after midday, and as the man resumed his seat, there was a tread without, a sound of keys grating in their lock, then the door opened and the jailer entered, carrying a sparse meal, which he set down near the prisoner.

The man looked up and nodded good-naturedly enough.

"I thought you didn't mean to let me have any dinner," he said.

"Oh, I don't want to starve you," returned the jailer. "Eat and make yourself comfortable."

It was no unusual thing for the prisoner to engage this man in conversation, and if he was in the mood he answered readily and with sufficient kindness.

"What day of the month is this?" asked the man preparing to attack the repast set before him.

"The twelfth."

"How a fellow loses his count in this miserable hole," returned the prisoner.

"Don't slander your quarters, there's worse in the world; ten to one you've been in 'em."

"Maybe so and maybe not. I say, California sheep get pretty tough, now, don't they?" he continued, tearing vigorously at the baked mutton which had been placed before him.

"Makes a man strong to eat tough mutton," replied the jailer.

"Think so?" and the prisoner smiled a little, unseen by his companion.

"I am sure of it," said the jailer.

"Perhaps you've had your turn at it?" observed the man.

"Can't say I ever did, and don't want to."

"You needn't; still it's not so bad that one can't bear it."

The jailer prepared to retire.

"You're a cheerful, good-natured fellow, anyhow," he remarked.

"Yes, that is my way."

"And a good deal better than being so cantankerous as some chaps we have here; they only get harder treatment."

The prisoner agreed with him completely, and with some other careless remark, the jailer left the cell.

When the door closed, and he heard the heavy bolts clang into their sockets, the prisoner muttered:

"If I have to throttle you to-night, you won't think so well of my good-nature."

He laughed again, as if there had been something amusing in the thought, and finished his meal with as much dispatch as if some important business awaited its completion.

But when all was done, he had only to resume his silent watch, varying it by pacing up and down the narrow cell, and performing a variety of gymnastic feats, which seemed an unnecessary waste of muscle and strength.

So the afternoon wore by. The sunset came in; its faint gold streamed across the floor, and attracted the prisoner's eye. He rose, stretching out his hands as if to grasp it.

"This looks like freedom," he muttered. "It's a warning."

The superstition appeared to gratify him, and he remained in the same position until the brightness faded, and the gray shadows of twilight began to fill the room.

"It's gone," he said; "so much the better; I shall follow all the sooner."

He sat down again and waited. His restlessness and impatience had disappeared; a strong determination settled upon his face. He looked prepared for any emergency, and was ready to catch at any chance, however desperate, which might aid his plans.

The lamp in the corridor had been lighted while he sat there; the light struggled through the grating over the door, and played across the room among the shadows cast by the bars.

There he sat, listening to every sound from without with the stealthy quiet of a panther that sees his prey and is prepared to spring.

An hour might have passed before the jailer's heavy tread again sounded upon the pavement; he was whistling a merry tune, that rung strangely enough among those gloomy corridors and darkened cells.

When the prisoner heard the step pause before his door, he took from his bed the thick woolen blankets which lay upon it, and, grasping them in his hand, crept quietly behind the door.

The key turned in the lock, the heavy door swung upon its hinges with a sound so mournful and ominous, that had the man who entered been at all imaginative, he might have taken it for a warning. But he passed on, interrupting his song to call out something in a cheerful voice, but the prisoner did not answer.

"He must be asleep," muttered the jailer. "Well, well, poor chap, he hain't much else to do!"

He moved toward the bed, saying:

"Here, wake up, lazybones, and eat your supper before it gets cold."

The door swung slowly to its latch, but he did not heed the warning; a step sounded behind him, but before he could turn or cry out, the heavy blanket was thrown over his head, almost smothering him in its folds, and an iron grasp crushed him down upon the floor.

"Lie still, or I'll murder you," whispered a stern, hard voice.

The jailer's only response was a half-choked gurgle in his throat; whatever his courage or strength might have been, he was entirely powerless.

The prisoner continued his preparations with the utmost quiet; bound the unfortunate man to the iron bedstead, and so completely enveloped him in the blanket, that there was not the slightest hope of his extricating himself.

Stealthily the prisoner moved to the door, and looked down the corridor dimly lighted by a lamp at the further end. No one was stirring; at that hour

the people employed in the jail were at their supper, as the man well knew, so that he found little risk of being observed.

He locked the door behind him, put the keys in his pocket, to be flung away when once beyond the walls, and walked rapidly but silently down the passage.

He was perfectly familiar with every winding and outlet of the prison, and moved hurriedly along through the shadows, down the stairs, along a back passage, where no guard was stationed as it communicated directly with the kitchens, and reached the outer door.

There he paused an instant, to be certain that he had made no mistake, looking about with as much composure as though he had been already beyond the danger of pursuit.

He had been in more terrible positions than that; had listened to the infuriated shouts of a mob thirsting for his life; had seen the body of a companion swung from a tree before his very eyes; and yet, amid all the horror and terror, had preserved his courage and presence of mind sufficiently to make his way among the very men who were hunting him down with the fury of bloodhounds.

An hour passed. The jailer in the dark cell had managed, with his teeth and nails, to enlarge a rent in the blanket sufficiently to extricate his head. His feet were pinioned, but he crept along the pavement to the door, and beat heavily against the bars to summon assistance from without, but nothing answered, save the echo of his frantic cries and the sharp blows upon the barred oak.

Away out upon a little eminence, that still from the distance commanded a view of the prison, stood the escaped criminal, casting a last glance back upon the weather-stained walls. He lifted his hand with a gesture of mockery and exultation, plunged down the hill, and was lost amid the dense woods that spread out for miles beyond.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DUEL.

MR. WARING's old housekeeper was ill—a most unusual misfortune to befall her, and one which she could not at first either realize or believe. She struggled against this sudden malady with all the energy and obstinacy of her nature; but she was at length forced to take to her bed and let the fever have its course, while she grumbled and snarled at every mortal who approached, and gave the poor girl who was obliged to take care of her a precious life indeed.

But while the old lady lay snapping and rabid with fever, affairs in the house did not go on smoothly at all, and nervous Mr. Waring nearly fretted himself into a fever which almost equaled that which had taken such sharp hold of his rebellious housekeeper.

Margaret was busy with her own troubles; and, besides, she was affected with that horror of domestic matters, which, I am sorry to say, is so common among my youthful countrywomen, and entirely neglected to interest herself in the domestic annoyances that beset them.

In the meantime the servants ran riot below stairs, and, as several of them were new-comers, belonging to the Celtic race into the bargain, they took such advantage of the housekeeper's absence that it soon became doubtful whether they would condescend to prepare meals for any portion of the family except that which reigned in the kitchen.

Mr. Waring sent for Miss Chase to his room for consultation. The lady was all sweetness and affability, declared her willingness to do everything in her power to restore the household to order, but more than hinted that Margaret would not permit her to interfere.

Of course the old gentleman was in a sad way, but poor Meg's health had become so delicate that he did not venture to speak with her upon the subject; and the only thing he could do was to listen favorably to any proposal which Miss Chase made.

"I will go down to town this very morning," she said, "and I am very certain that I shall return with

a woman perfectly competent to take charge of your household."

When she saw how Mr. Waring brightened at that information, she added another touch of comfort:

"I have the address somewhere of a woman who once lived for a time with Mrs. Pierson. If I can find her, she will suit you admirably."

The matter was satisfactorily arranged. Mr. Waring began to look upon Sybil as a sort of guardian-angel; and she bade him good-morning with her sweetest smile to make preparations for her expedition.

Sybil returned from the city that night accompanied by a respectable elderly female, who set about her duties in such a quiet, understanding way that everybody was delighted and something like peace restored.

Of course the old housekeeper grumbled more than ever, and was prepared to consider the stranger the most abominable of her sex; but no one paid much attention, and, as every spasm of rage only increased her fever, and she was quite incapable of controlling her temper, there seemed every probability that placid Mrs. Brown would hold the reins of government in her chubby fingers for some time to come.

And now events began to thicken about that once cheerful house on the river, and those miserable young beings were urged forward to the last act of anger and injustice which should consummate their misery. The net which Sybil had woven had been slowly and surely drawn about them, and now the opportunity was offered which completed the work she had so skillfully arranged.

The estrangement between Laurence and Margaret was daily gaining strength. Laurence began really to believe that he hated her, and the fascination which Sybil had thrown about him became enthralling. He came to the house now merely to hold long, confidential conversations with her, and from every one he retired more completely bewildered and enslaved.

He had quarreled with Hinchley, although the young man remained at the house as his uncle's invited guest. He was deeply pained by the state of affairs, and still hoped to reunite his cousin and friend.

It might have been a fortnight after the installation of Mrs. Brown when Sybil and Laurence were walking in the shrubbery at some distance from the house.

They saw Hinchley pass down a neighboring path in full view of the spot where they stood, although he was unconscious of their presence. Laurence muttered bitter execrations against the intruder; and while Sybil was soothing him, they saw the new housekeeper go cautiously down the path and join Hinchley. She gave him a note and stole away again.

"I understand now," whispered Laurence. "She is made a medium of communication between that man and Margaret. She shall tell me the truth, or I will annihilate her."

He drew Sybil forward and stood directly in the path as Mrs. Brown approached. When she saw them, the woman started back with every evidence of fear and confusion; but Laurence grasped her roughly by the arm.

"You gave that man a note from Miss Margaret," he said.

The woman began to cry at once.

"Oh, sir, don't make me lose my place! I couldn't refuse the young lady! Do speak a word for me, Miss Chase. I mean to be faithful. I didn't mean any harm."

"And you have carried notes between them before?" demanded Laurence.

"I didn't know it was wrong—indeed I didn't. Tell him I am an honest woman, Miss Chase."

"Go into the house, Brown," said the lady, coldly.

"I am disappointed in you."

Laurence released her arm, and she darted away wringing her hands in sad distress. Laurence made

a step toward the place where Hinchley stood reading the letter with a look of doubt and astonishment.

"Stop," whispered Sybil. "What are you going to do?"

"Take that letter—know the truth."

She attempted to plead with him, but he pushed her aside and strode toward Hinchley. The young man looked up, startled at his unexpected approach, and made a movement to conceal the note in his hand.

"Give me that letter!" exclaimed Laurence, in a hoarse voice.

"A very singular demand, sir," returned Hinchley, coldly.

"I will have it—the proof of your treachery and hers—you miserable coward!"

He sprang forward, seized Hinchley in his infuriated grasp, and a short but severe struggle took place. At last, Laurence flung his opponent back and seized the note.

"Scoundrel!" exclaimed Hinchley. "Give back that paper."

"Never! I will read it!"

Sybil saw that she must interfere, or Laurence would not be permitted to open the sheet; so she hurried up with hysteric sobs, and threw her arms about Hinchley.

"No violence!" she sobbed. "Oh, don't quarrel, Mr. Hinchley, don't."

While he vainly tried to extricate himself from her hold, Laurence tore open the letter and read it. He would hardly have been human had he not given way to the storm of fury which swept over him.

The writing was Margaret's, the letter signed with her name, and it revealed the story of her wretchedness, her desire to free herself from her engagement, and her belief that she was loved by Hinchley. The note went on to say that he need have no scruples about seeking her hand, as she was determined never to marry Laurence.

The young man dropped the letter with a groan.

Sybil released Hinchley, whose anger seemed to have changed to pity at the sight of his former friend's distress.

"She never wrote it, Laurence," he exclaimed.

"I would pledge my life on it."

"Who then?" he answered. "Is there another woman on earth brazen enough to have written it?"

"How can I tell? But I would stake my life that it is a forgery."

He glanced at Sybil; something in her attitude brought back his old suspicions, but they were so vague, her innocence in the present matter so apparent, that it would have seemed madness to have spoken of them. Again Laurence turned upon him most furiously, and hurled such terrible epithets and charges against him, that no man of courage could have endured them.

Sybil Chase left the two men pale with wrath, and rushed away, not frightened at what she had done, but believing it wiser for her to escape from the scene; for language had been employed on both sides that could only end in apologies or deadly violence. Hinchley was wrought to a pitch of frenzy nearly equal to that which convulsed Laurence.

He grasped eagerly at a defiance which fell from his opponent.

"When you will," he answered. "You will find me always ready to vindicate my honor."

"So be it," returned Laurence. "Before sunset to-night, let your life or mine pay the forfeit; we can not breathe the same air another day."

Before they parted it was settled—angrily settled—that two school friends, men who had been intimate and loving as brothers, should stand face to face, each opposed to his murderer. This is the true word. Call dueling the only resource of wounded honor if you will; it is murder, after all—murder the most atrocious, from its very coolness and premeditation.

Hinchley broke away abruptly, after having regained possession of the fatal letter, and Laurence rushed toward the house to find Margaret, and overwhelm her with his knowledge of her weakness and treachery.

It had been a dark, wretched day to the girl, passed between the sick chamber of her uncle and that of the old housekeeper. Mr. Waring had been seized with one of his violent attacks, and was lying comatose. Exhausted with watching, Margaret found an opportunity to rest, and went downstairs to the library, meeting Sybil Chase in the hall.

"Will you go and sit with my uncle for a while, Miss Chase?" she asked, wearily.

"Certainly," replied Sybil, somewhat flurried after her escape from the garden, but concealing her emotion with her usual success. "You look quite worn out; it would do you good to sleep."

Margaret passed on without vouchsafing a reply; her dislike of the woman had grown into absolute aversion during the past days, and it was with difficulty that she could force herself to receive her advances with common civility.

Margaret entered the library, closed the door and threw herself upon a couch, hoping for a time to forget her distress and bitter feelings in slumber. She fell asleep at once, and was aroused from an incoherent dream by the violent opening of the door, and a hoarse voice called out:

"Margaret—Margaret Waring?"

She started up, confused by the abrupt awakening, and with a vague impression that her uncle had been taken suddenly worse; but she saw Laurence standing before her, livid with passion. Margaret rose at once, and coldly said:

"Mr. Laurence, you will please come into a room which I occupy, somewhat less boisterously."

"I grieve exceedingly to have disturbed your delicate nerves," he replied, with a hoarse laugh; "but I have that to say which will possibly shock them still more."

She gave him a haughty glance, which roused his fury to still greater violence.

"Nothing you could do would shock me," she said. "I am prepared for any thing."

"Then you are prepared to hear that I have discovered your falsehood and treachery! Miserable, cowardly girl, why did you not come frankly and tell me the truth?"

Her pride rose to meet the passion which flamed in his eyes.

"Mr. Laurence," she exclaimed, "I have borne a great deal from you; but you shall not insult me in this house!"

"Why did you not say to me frankly—I detest this marriage?" he continued. "Do you think I would not have freed you at once?"

"I do not know what you mean," she answered, trembling with angry astonishment at his words. "But let me tell you now I do dread it—loathe the very thought of it."

"So this you wrote to him," he exclaimed. "I have seen the letter! Why, shame on you, Margaret Waring! I would not have believed you thus lost to all womanly pride. What! tell a man unsought that you loved him? and you honorably bound to another."

She stared at him in angry surprise—her lips apart, her wild eyes full of scornful incredulity.

"You have been dreaming, or you are crazy," she said.

"Neither the one nor the other: but I know everything."

"I do not understand you," she replied, relapsing into the haughty coldness which always enraged him more than any bitter words that she could speak.

"Oh, do not add another falsehood to the list!" he exclaimed. "Haven't you perjured your soul enough already? I tell you that I read the letter you wrote to Ralph Hinchley. I have watched you for weeks; I know the whole extent of your shameful duplicity."

"Stop!" cried Margaret. "I will endure no more. Leave this house, Mr. Laurence, at once, and forever! While we both live, I will never see your face again; my uncle decides this night, between you and me; either he confirms what I now say, or I will leave his house."

"So be it; do not think I regret it! Why, I came here only to expose and cast you off. Your uncle shall see that letter. I will have it, or tear it from Hinchley's heart. When Waring has read that, we shall see what he thinks of his dainty niece."

"Of all this passion I do not comprehend one word; but it wearies me. Go, sir."

"Do you dare deny having written to Ralph Hinchley that you loved him—that you were ready to abandon your engagement and marry him?"

"Oh!" groaned Margaret, almost fainting from a sharp recoil of outraged feeling, "is there no man living who will avenge me on this libeler?"

"He may, perhaps, avenge you; why not?" retorted Laurence; "but answer. You shall answer and confess this duplicity, or blacken your soul with another lie. Did you write to Hinchley?"

"I did," said Margaret; "a note of three lines, asking him to pay a bill for me at Diamond."

"Margaret! Margaret! this effrontery only makes it more unbearable," he cried. "I will expose you to the whole world."

"Do what you please—say what you choose, but leave this house, and never let me see you again."

"I go willingly. Farewell forever, Margaret! I do not curse; time will do that, and I can wait."

He dashed out of the room, pale and fierce with contending passions, and hurried from her presence.

Margaret stood upright until the door closed, then her hands fell to her side, a low moan broke from her lips, and she dropped senseless upon the couch.

It was near sunset when she came to herself again; Sybil Chase was bending over her, bathing her forehead and using words of tender solicitude, while a little way off stood the new housekeeper, apparently quite overcome with distress.

Margaret pushed Miss Chase away, and would have left the room without a word, but Sybil caught her arm, while a strange light shot into her eyes.

"I must detain you a moment," she said. "Your uncle has been seized with a frightful attack; the physician is with him now."

"What caused it?" demanded Margaret.

"Mr. Laurence was with him," faltered Sybil.

Margaret turned upon her with cold scrutiny.

"Miss Chase," she said, "I believe on my soul that you are at the bottom of all this trouble. I desire you to quit the house at once."

Sybil pleaded, wept, and demanded an explanation, but Margaret broke from her, and hurried out of the room.

"What is to come now?" whispered the woman, going close to Sybil, who stood looking after Margaret, and smiling as only women like her can smile.

"She has done exactly what I desired," she answered. "I shall leave this house in an hour; you will go with me."

"But the duel?"

"Oh! that drives me frantic; but I believe Hinchley will be the sufferer—I should go mad else! Pack my things, and meet me at the station in an hour."

She hurried away, without giving the woman time to speak, and left the house at once.

Sybil took her way rapidly through the grounds, crossed the high road, and ran through the fields until she reached a lofty ascent, from whence she could command a view of the broad sandy plain beneath.

She was only just in time; there she stood, and gazed below with the same expression her face had worn upon the night when she watched her husband's frightful death in the wilds of California.

Only a few paces from each other stood Laurence and Ralph Hinchley; each held a pistol in his hand, and even as Sybil looked, one of the seconds gave the word.

There was a simultaneous report, a blinding flash.

and when the smoke cleared away, Sybil saw Hinchley stretched upon the ground, the two assistants bending over him, and Laurence standing in his old position.

She heard one of the men say:

"Save yourself, Laurence," then Hinchley called out:

"Not yet—not yet; it is only my arm; there is no danger. Edward, believe me, Margaret never wrote that letter. Keep her name out of this quarrel. It will yet be explained."

Laurence only replied by a gesture of dissent. The seconds raised the wounded man, bore him to a carriage which was stationed a little way off, placed him upon the seat, and the party drove away.

Laurence stood like a statue, gazing moodily upon the pistol he grasped in his hand.

Sybil hurried down the bank, calling out:

"Laurence! Laurence!"

He turned at her approach, flung the pistol away, and caught her in his arms.

"I am revenged," he said. "I have nothing left in the world but you, Sybil Chase. Oh, say that you love me!"

The long expected moment had arrived, and, regardless of the sins by which that painful bliss had been purchased, Sybil Chase folded her white arms around his neck and gave passionate expression to the wild love that had burned in her heart for years.

Now the great object of her misguided life was attained. She was free from the man who had been a terrible barrier between them. The engagement was broken by her own arts. With all this, why was there so much pain left in her heart? Why did she tremble so violently in the first clasp of his arms?

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BATTERY.

SEVERAL days passed, and more miserable ones never dawned upon the household at Brooklawn.

Gerald Waring was dead. The excitement into which he had been thrown by Laurence's insane story, the passionate denunciations of Margaret, and the unaccountable departure of Sybil Chase had brought on a recurrence of his disease more violent than any sufferings that had preceded, and before noon the next day he was a corpse.

Margaret sat alone in her room, desolate and almost maddened by the events of the past days. Her uncle was dead, and now she stood in the world utterly alone. He was the last of her family, the only human being upon whom she had the slightest claim of kindred save the slight clew of blood that bound her to Ralph Hinchley.

Waring's property, never very extensive, had been heavily mortgaged to gratify his expensive tastes and invalid caprices. Brooklawn must be sold, and after that painful event Margaret must go forth into the world homeless and desolate. Selfish and thoughtless as Waring was, he would have made some provision for his niece, but that he was confident of her marriage with Laurence, by which she would be placed in a position far beyond need of assistance. Thus assured, the weak man dismissed the matter entirely from his mind, and thought only of his present comforts.

Margaret had seen Hinchley and learned every thing from him. The truth only aroused her pride more forcibly. There was no relenting in her purpose; though broken, miserable, and beset with poverty, she would have rejected Laurence had he knelt before her pleading for pardon. Her proud heart had been more revolted at the fact that he could doubt her truth than by all the cruelty of his conduct.

Gerald Waring was buried. He had lived in small things, and his life was of little value to any human being, except Margaret. She, poor girl, mourned him greatly; and as the days passed into weeks, and it became necessary for her to think of another

home, her loneliness and desolation increased into absolute dejection.

When Hinchley recovered from his wound sufficiently to go out, he visited Margaret several times; but was quite unable to throw any light upon the mystery which surrounded them, save the bare facts of the quarrel and separation.

Sybil Chase had settled herself in comfortable lodgings in New York, and there Laurence visited her daily. With each day his wounded pride grew more sensitive, and his condemnation of Margaret increased. Sybil knew how to strengthen the infatuation which bound him within the spell of her influence, and thus her control became supreme.

Hinchley could not meet Laurence—he knew the utter folly of an attempt at reconciliation. His own feelings toward the unhappy man were those of profound pity. He was certain that Edward loved Margaret—that the only hope of happiness for either in this world lay in a cordial understanding of the truth. Thus he determined to spare no pains in clearing up the utter darkness which enveloped their lives, and in restoring them to the brightness of that early dream which had made life so beautiful to both while it lasted.

Still, though the weeks passed and the beautiful spring deepened into summer, nothing occurred which could give Hinchley the least clew. In his own mind he fully believed Sybil Chase the author of all that terrible unhappiness, and with these thoughts there came back a recollection of that night in California, when his life was so nearly sacrificed. He reproached himself for connecting her with those images but could not drive the fearful thought away. Always, when he recalled that awful struggle, the chamber in the old house, and the quick retribution dealt to his assailant, there rose before him the dim figure of that woman in the distance, and always behind the shrouding shadows he saw the features of Sybil Chase.

Watching and waiting, he neglected all business and every personal interest. He walked the streets, meditating upon those inexplicable occurrences, haunted every spot that Sybil Chase frequented, but all without result; when the day was over he could only return to Margaret, and find her pale, ill and heart-broken as he had left her.

Some errand connected with that all-engrossing affair carried him, one day, into a street which led to the Battery; he had obtained a clew to the residence of Mrs. Brown, and was following it up with a hope that she might be bribed or frightened into some revelation which would tend to make his course more clear.

A California steamer had just arrived at its wharf, and the eager crowd came surging up the street along which Hinchley was slowly sauntering in a painful reverie. He looked with idle curiosity from face to face of the motley throng, glad of any event which would for a moment take his thoughts from the mournful subject which had so long engrossed him.

Suddenly he beheld upon the other side of the way a face which brought him to an abrupt pause, while an exclamation, almost of terror, broke from his lips. After the first glance of uncertainty, the firm, severe look natural to his features passed over them.

The man who had disturbed him so walked by, unconscious of his scrutiny. The face was pale from sickness or confinement, the long beard had been shaven, the dress was altered, but through all the change Hinchley recognized him. That image was too closely connected with the most fearful era in his life ever to be forgotten.

After the first instant of horror and surprise, his active mind centered upon itself; the opportunity at least of identifying Sybil Chase with the woman he had seen was offered. What might follow he dared not think of—the hope was too great and joyous in the midst of so much suffering.

He turned and followed the man swiftly; came up to him in a narrow and almost deserted street and

laid his hand upon his shoulder. The stranger started like an escaped prisoner who felt the grasp of his pursuers upon him; but when he saw Ralph Hinchley's face, he uttered a cry and endeavored to break away. But the young man held him fast, and a few rapid words reassured the fugitive so much that he walked quietly by his side and listened to him doubtfully, glancing around like a wild animal in fear of pursuit, and ready at the slightest sound to take flight.

"It is useless to deny what I say," was the conclusion of Hinchley's hasty address. "I mean you no harm. Only answer my questions, and you may go."

"Speak out then," returned the man, sullenly, "though I don't know why the deuce I should let a man I never saw before come up and question me in this way."

"You remember me, and did from the first," replied Hinchley, regarding him with keen decision. "Your eyes waver—you are pale, too. This is cowardly. Come, man, you need not be afraid; for any thing I shall do you are safe enough. What I want is the truth, and not even that about yourself."

"Well," replied the man, laughing in a reckless way, "the truth is not difficult to tell about other people, though I am out of practice."

After a little more persuasion he followed Hinchley on to the Battery, and, sitting down under a tree, they conversed eagerly. Very soon all doubt and fear left the man's face, a stern passion and fierce exultation lit every feature, while from Ralph Hinchley's faded the shadow and gloom that had clouded his countenance for weeks.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE VALLEY RANCH.

SYBIL CHASE was sitting in the apartments which she had taken on leaving Mr. Waring's residence.

Her dress, always simple and elegant, was even more studied and elaborately delicate than usual; the face wore its lightest, fairest look, and one seeing her as she sat gazing down the street, evidently in momentary expectation of some person not yet in sight, would have thought that no anxiety or stern thought had ever found a resting-place in her bosom.

That for which she had toiled and plotted, treading ruthlessly over the hearts and happiness of all who stood in her way, had been gained—in one week she would be the wife of Edward Laurence.

Sybil was expecting him then; he spent the greater portion of each day in her society, and the influence which she had gained seemed constantly to increase.

While she waited there was a low knock at the door. Sybil started up with a beautiful smile of welcome, which changed to a look of surprise when the door opened and only a servant appeared, saying:

"There's a gentleman, ma'am, who wants to see you."

"I am engaged. I told you to admit no one but Mr. Laurence."

"I know it, but he would have me come up; he says he won't keep you a moment."

"Be quick, then," she answered, impatiently.

The man went out and closed the door; but while Sybil was considering who her visitor might be, it was flung open, and Ralph Hinchley stood before her. She stepped forward with an angry gesture.

"Why have you come here?" she asked. "I do not desire your visits, Mr. Hinchley."

"Nor is it at all probable that I shall ever pay you another, madam; but this one you will have the patience to endure."

"Mr. Laurence will soon be here," she said, haughtily; "possibly you would prefer not to meet him."

"I desire to see him—it is part of my business

here; but, first, I wish to introduce an old acquaintance of yours."

He went to the door, flung it open, and Sybil beheld a form which she had believed long since cold in the grave, the old, cruel light in the eyes, the mocking smile upon the lips—her husband.

She started back with a cry of dreary pain.

"Don't be alarmed, Sybil," he said, quietly advancing toward her. "Of course you are glad to see your 'own, own Philip.' That used to be the term, I think."

"Keep off—keep off!" she shrieked, insane with fear and the suddenness of the shock. "Philip Yates is dead. I saw him hanged. You saw him, also, on the blasted pine, Ralph Hinchley."

"Excuse me," returned Yates; "I ought to know, and I assure you that I am as much alive as either of you. Tom Dickinson, poor fellow, they hung him in my place. He managed to steal my clothes from the wardrobe, hoping the men would take him for me, and help him off. So you really thought it was me they swung up; poor Sybil, what a disappointment! Well, it was natural. Tom and I did look alike, especially when he was on good behavior; but I wouldn't have thought it of you, Sybil—not know your own husband! My darling, that is not complimentary."

She answered by a groan so despairing that it might have softened any heart less steeled against her than those of the two men who looked quietly on.

"No, no, Sybil," he continued; "while Tom was doubling like a fox, and you screaming for some one to pounce on me, I slipped away through the cellar, and into the bush. Why, bless your soul, I was perched just above you on the precipice all the time, and if you hadn't made off with the horse, should have got clear, instead of being caught among the rocks like a rat in a trap."

Sybil sunk slowly into a chair while he was giving these revolting details, and, covering her face with both hands, interrupted him only with her faint moans. While she sat thus abject and wounded, Edward Laurence entered the room. He stopped short on the threshold, astonished at the presence of those two men. He looked from one to the other in amazement. Then turning on Hinchley, demanded in stern wrath how he had dared to enter that dwelling.

"Hush, hush!" returned Ralph, mournfully. "You will have enough to repent, Edward; be silent now."

Before Laurence could speak, Yates stepped toward Sybil, seized her by the arm and forced her to stand up.

"Come," he said, "you and I are going away from here."

"I will not move," she moaned, desperately. "Let me go, I say."

Laurence started forward trembling with indignation, but the man pushed him rudely aside.

"Don't interfere between husband and wife," he said, coldly. "I warn you it won't be safe."

"What do you mean?" said Laurence. "Great heavens! Sybil, who is this man?"

She did not answer; in that moment all her duplicity and art failed; she could only moan and turn away her frightened face.

"I am Philip Yates, her husband," answered he. "I have brought my marriage certificate on purpose to prove it."

He took a paper from his pocket and gave it to Laurence, who read it with a confused idea of its import. At last he lifted a hand to his forehead.

"I must be insane," he faltered.

"No," returned Hinchley, "you are just coming back to your senses. That woman, Laurence, is the female I saw in California upon the night when I so narrowly escaped from the Valley Ranch with my life."

"Never you mind that story," interrupted Yates; "that's all gone by. Well, Mr. Laurence, you don't

seem to believe us yet; Sybil shall answer for her self."

"I will not speak," she cried. "You may kill me but I will not open my lips."

"Kill you, my pet? why, I expect years of happiness with you still. We are going back to California, my dear."

"Sybil! Sybil!" groaned Laurence.

"You shall speak," continued Yates. "Tell him your real name; do it, I say!"

He transfixed her with his terrible glance; the old fear and dread came back. She was like a person magnetized against her will.

Without glancing toward Laurence, without being able to move her eyes from that fiery glance, she answered in a low, strange voice:

"I am Sybil Yates. I am his wife."

"Bravo!" exclaimed the gambler, exultantly.

"Now, Mr. Laurence, I hope you are satisfied."

The young man did not answer; he could only stand, horror-stricken, upon the brink of the abyss down which he had so nearly plunged.

Hinchley went to the door, and led in the woman who had served for a time as housekeeper at Brooklawn.

"This person," he said, "has a story to tell; luckily, circumstances have placed her quite in my power."

Sybil sprang again to her feet.

"Don't speak!" she cried; "don't speak!"

"I must, my dear," replied the woman, sobbing.

"They'll never let me alone if I don't."

"Who wrote the letter Mr. Laurence saw you give me?" demanded Hinchley.

The woman pointed to Sybil.

"It is false!" she exclaimed. "Margaret Waring wrote it."

"Nonsense, Sybil," returned Yates. "What's the good of keeping this up? You're found out, and that's the end of it. You thought I was dead, you wanted to marry Mr. Laurence—always did, for that matter—and laid your plans beautifully. Upon my word, I honor you! But, you see, I am inconveniently alive, your old mother has been frightened into telling the truth for once, so there's nothing for it but to get away to the Valley Ranch. The miners have forgot that little affair, and we shall find something brighter than potatoes in the cellar. You know that."

She looked at him with her frightened eyes.

"Don't take on so," he said, with a gleam of feeling. "I always loved you better than you believed."

So we'll forget and forgive. As for Mr. Hinchley, he ought to go down on his knees and fill your lap with gold. If it hadn't been for her, I tell you, old fellow, you would never have seen daylight again. After all, that woman's a tramp. I wouldn't give her up for all the gold in California."

"Sybil," said Laurence, in a grave, low voice, "is this thing true?"

She struggled for voice, and replied, very faintly:

"It is true! God help me, it is true; but I thought he was dead. It was night, and I so terrified that the face was not clear. Oh! if it was only death that he brings instead of these bonds."

Laurence looked on her distress with heavy eyes.

"And Margaret?"

She started as if a viper had stung her, then broke into fresh moans, rocking to and fro on her chair.

"If we wronged her—if that letter was not genuine, tell me, that I may offer the poor atonement in my power."

She looked up into his eyes with such anguish, that even Yates seemed troubled.

"Speak the truth, Sybil," he said, "speak the truth, I say; did the young lady write that letter they were talking about?"

"I wrote the letter," she murmured.

"That's enough—that's like you, Sybil," said Yates, triumphantly, forcing her cold hands from her face, and kissing them till she shuddered all

over. "Now you can go, gentlemen. I should like a little private conversation with my wife."

Ralph Hinchley took Laurence by the arm and led him gently from the room.

A year after this scene, when Yates had gone to California in search of the gold left buried at the ranch, Laurence and Margaret, all the wiser for the bitter experience of the past, stood before the altar of the pretty church near Mr. Waring's homestead, which was to be the resting-place of their future lives.

Surely, that little country church never witnessed a happier wedding, or sheltered a lovelier bride. The newly married pair went quietly to the home which now became sacred to them both. The ceremony which united their once estranged hearts had endowed them with wealth, and thus it had been in their power to keep that fine old place from the hammer. In after years, the voices of merry children rung through the rose-thickets where Sybil Yates had woven her snares, and a fine-looking couple might have been observed, any fair day, walking arm-in-arm along the walks which that artful woman had once shared with the gentleman; but he had forgotten her in the tranquil happiness of a peaceful life, and her name was blotted out from all his thoughts.

On the very day of this wedding, a wild scene was being enacted at the Valley Ranch. Yates and Sybil had that day entered their old dwelling—he elated with the success of his disguise which had carried him through vigilance committees and wild groups of gold-seekers, and she a weary, subdued woman, who had outlived even the power of wishing, and this while her hair was bright, and her cheeks smooth with youth. She was aware that Edward Laurence was to be married that day, but even that knowledge failed to disturb the leaden apathy which lay upon her.

The ranch was desolate—an old Indian woman, who remained in the kitchen received them with more of terror than welcome.

"Don't be frightened, old woman," said Yates. "We sha'n't stay long to trouble you; only get some supper for Mrs. Yates, and find me some kind of a lamp. I don't like the look of things here."

The old woman went to the other end of the kitchen, in search of a lamp. In passing the window, she saw a crowd of human faces looking in, but said nothing, as hands were uplifted threateningly, and wild eyes glared a warning upon her.

Yates went out, shading the lamp with his hands. He took a large leather sack from some luggage which had been cast down in the hall, and went cautiously into the cellar. Entering the inner cave, he removed the barrels, and opening the iron chest, gathered up handfuls of gold and packages of dust, which he crowded roughly down into the bag. He was busy with a larger package than had yet presented itself when a hand was laid heavily on his shoulder. Yates started back, dragging the leather sack with him into the midst of a crowd of armed men who filled the cellar.

It was horrible, the stillness of that moment. Those fierce men spoke in whispers. They dragged the victim forth in silence, but the tramp of their feet fell horribly on the night. Half an hour after Yates received that lamp from the trembling hands of the Indian woman, exulting in his safety, a branch of the blasted pine bent low with a second victim, and Sybil was indeed a widow.

At this day, the Valley Ranch is inhabited by the solitary woman, who, with her Indian servant lives alone in the old house. She still sits by the chamber window, and looks out upon the bridle-path leading from the mines, but with the dull apathy of a spirit which has lost everything. Gray hairs have crept thickly into those rich, golden tresses, and the remnants of her beauty are mournful to look upon, Sybil Yates is indeed a widow now."

THE END.

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